

# Virtue: Can It Be Taught?

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ARE THERE MEN AND WOMEN in America today possessed of virtue sufficient to withstand and repel the forces of disorder? Or have we, as a people, grown too fond of creature-comforts and a fancied security to venture our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor in any cause at all? "The superior man thinks always of virtue," Confucius told his disciples; "the common man thinks of comfort." Such considerations in recent years have raised up again that old word "virtue," which in the first half of this century had sunk almost out of sight.

In this essay I shall venture first to offer you a renewed apprehension of what "virtue" means; and then to suggest how far it may be possible to restore an active virtue in our public and our private life. If we lack virtue, we will not long continue to enjoy comfort — not in an age when Giant Ideology and Giant Envy swagger balefully about the world.

The concept of virtue, like most other concepts that have endured and remain worthy of praise, has come down to us from the Greeks and the Hebrews. In its classical signification, "virtue" means the power of anything to accomplish its specific function; a property capable of producing certain effects; strength, force, potency. Thus one refers to the "deadly virtue" of the hemlock. Thus also the word "virtue" implies a mysterious energetic power, as in the Gospel According to Saint Mark: "Jesus, immediately knowing that *virtue* had gone out of him, turned him about in the press, and said, Who touched my clothes?" Was it, we may ask, that virtue of Jesus which scorched the Shroud of Turin?

Virtue, then, meant in the beginning some extraordinary power. The word was applied to the sort of person we might now call "the charismatic leader." By extension, "virtue" came to imply the qualities of full humanity: strength, courage, capacity, worth, manliness, moral excellence. And presently "virtue" came to signify, as well, moral goodness: the practice of moral duties and the conformity of life to the moral law; uprightness; rectitude.

In recent decades, many folk seemingly grew embarrassed by this word virtue; perhaps for them it had too stern a Roman ring. They made the word "integrity" do duty for the discarded "virtue." Now "integrity" signifies wholeness or completeness; freedom from corruption; soundness of principle and character. You will gather that "integrity" is chiefly a passive quality, somewhat deficient in the vigor of "virtue." People of integrity may be the salt of the earth; yet a rough age requires some people possessed of an energetic virtue.

When we say that a man or a woman is virtuous, what do we mean? Plato declared that there are four chief virtues of the soul: justice, prudence, temperance, and fortitude. (Of these, the virtue most required in a statesman is prudence, Plato remarked.) To these classical virtues, Saint Paul added the theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity. These constitute the Seven Virtues of the Schoolmen. Against them are set the Seven Deadly Sins: pride, avarice, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth. Incidentally, there was a more specific medieval list of "the sins that cry out to heaven for vengeance": oppression of the poor, willful murder, sodomy, and defrauding a laborer of his wages.

Such formulas of the cardinal and the theological virtues have been fixed in the minds of many of us, either through church teachings or through humane letters. Yet virtue is something more than the sum of its seven parts. From the sixth century before Christ down to the twentieth century, this word "virtue" carried with it the strong suggestion of public leadership. The truly virtuous man would assume public duties, the ancients believed. Take these words from Cicero's *Republic*: "What can be more noble than the government of the state by virtue? For then the man who rules others is not himself a slave to any passion, but has already acquired for himself all those qualities to which he is training and summoning his fellows. Such a man

imposes no laws upon the people that he does not obey himself, but puts his own life before his fellow-citizens as their law."

By the "virtuous man," that is, the classical writers meant a leader in statecraft and in war, one who towered above his fellow-citizens, a person in whom courage, wisdom, self-restraint, and just dealing were conspicuous. They meant a being of energy and force, moved almost by a power out of himself.

How was this virtue, this conspicuous merit and talent to lead, acquired by men and women? That question provoked the famous debate between Socrates and Aristophanes. Socrates argued that virtue and wisdom at bottom are one. When first I read Socrates' argument, I being then a college freshman, this seemed to me an insupportable thesis; for we all have known human beings of much intelligence and cleverness whose light is as darkness. After considerable experience of the world and the passage of more than four decades, to me Socrates' argument seems yet more feeble.

And so it seemed to Aristophanes. The sophists—that is, the teachers of rhetoric and prudence, Socrates among them—professed that they could teach virtue to the rising generation. Through development of the private rationality, those teachers declared, they could form talented leaders within the state: men of virtue, or charismatic power, endowed with the talents required for private and public success.

To the great comic poet, this notion seemed a dangerous absurdity. Greatness of soul and good character are not formed by hired tutors, Aristophanes maintained: virtue is "natural," not an artificial development. Who possesses virtue? Why, not some presumptuous elite of young men trailing effeminately after some sophist or other. The true possessors of virtue are the men of the old families, reared to righteousness and courage, brought up in good moral habits, from their earliest years accustomed to discipline and duty. Their prudence and their daring defend the state. Just how far the hero-poet Aristophanes believed virtue to be inherited, and how far he took it to be nurtured by family example and tradition, we do not know at this

remove. But it is clear that Aristophanes laughed to scorn the thesis that virtue may be imparted by schoolmasters.

The Greek teachers of philosophy, nevertheless, Plato and Aristotle eminent among them, refused to abandon their attempt to impart virtue through appeal to reason. A kind of compromise was reached in Aristotle's *Ethics*. There Aristotle argues that virtue is of two kinds: moral, and intellectual. Moral virtue grows out of habit (*ethos*); it is not natural, but neither is moral virtue opposed to nature. Intellectual virtue, on the other hand, may be developed and improved through systematic instruction—which requires time. In other words, moral virtue appears to be the product of habits formed early in family, class, neighborhood; while intellectual virtue may be taught through instruction in philosophy, literature, history, and related disciplines.

The experience of the Romans during their republican centuries may serve to delineate the two different kinds of virtue. So late as the period of Polybius, the Roman citizens retained their "high old Roman virtue," the product of tradition and deference to example, of habits acquired within the family. They maintained the virtues of reverence, seriousness, equitableness, firmness of purpose, tenacity, hard work, steadiness, frugality, unselfishness, self-restraint—and other virtues besides. All these were habits that grew into virtues.

Then came to Rome the Greek philosophers, with much abstract talk of virtue. But the more the sophists praised an abstract virtue, the more did the *mores maiorum*, the ancient manners or habits of Rome, sink into neglect. Ancestral ways diminished in power; ethical speculation spread. Although the high old Roman virtue was not altogether extinguished until the final collapse of *Romanitas* before the barbarian wanderers, by the time of Nero and Seneca there had come to exist, side by side, a fashionable array of ethical teachings, derived from Greek sources—and a general decay of public and private morals, from the highest social classes to the lowest.

This Roman experience seems to justify the argument of Aristophanes that virtue cannot be taught in schools. Rather, the sprig of vir-

tue is nurtured in the soil of sound prejudice; healthful and valorous habits are formed; and, in the phrase of Burke, "a man's habit becomes his virtue." A resolute and daring character, dutiful and just, may be formed accordingly.

During the Korean war, only one American soldier taken prisoner and confined in North Korea succeeded in escaping and making his way back to his own lines—a sergeant named Pate, set down in his captors' records as a "reactionary." Sergeant Pate, an unlettered man, was possessed of the Roman virtues of *disciplina*, *firmitas*, *constantia*, and *frugalitas*. His father, Pate remarked, had taught him only two principles: first, if a man calls you a liar, knock him down; if he calls you a son of a bitch, kill him. Ethical instruction in casuistry might have made Sergeant Pate less resistant to Communist indoctrination and less resolute in his daring escape: that is, less virtuous. For virtue, we should remember, is energy of soul employed for the general good.

Intellectual virtue divorced from moral virtue may wither into a loathsome thing. Robespierre was called by his admirers "the voice of virtue"; certainly Robespierre (who justified the slaughter of his opponents by coining the aphorism that one can't make an omelet without breaking eggs) was forever prating of virtue. "Virtue was always in a minority on the earth," said that murderous prig, the "Sea-Green Incorruptible." That sort of intellectual virtue, an aspect of what I have called defecated rationality, still rises up perennially in Paris, and is exported to Ethiopia, to Cambodia, to any national soil that seems ready-furrowed for this poisonous seed. Intellectual virtue, genus Robespierre, is a kind of delusory ethical snobbery, ferocious and malicious, annihilating ordinary human beings because they are not angels.

The abstract intellectual virtue of the Parisian coffee-house intellectual, I am suggesting, is a world away from the habitual high old Roman virtue. The virtues of the statesmen and soldiers of the early American Republic were not at all allied to the bloody fanatical "virtue" that was to arise during the French Revolution. So if we aspire to renew American virtue near the close of the twentieth century, surely we will do well to look

with skepticism upon proposals for some sort of abstract "civil religion." An arid virtue that is intellectual only must be unreliable at best, and dangerous often. From time to time in recent years, various educational instrumentalists and progressivists have advocated the public teaching of a "religion of democracy"—that is, a public ethic founded upon ideological premises. Such an artificial intellectual contraption, with no better footing, would be mischievous in its consequences.

A false, carping, malicious "virtue" is worse than no virtue at all. The urgent need of the United States of America, near the end of the twentieth century, is for a virtue arising from habit and affection, rather than from ideological preaching. Without such a renewed true virtue, our commonwealth may not endure. I think of the words of Simone Weil concerning our era, in her "Reflections on Quantum Theory":

"It is as though we had returned to the age of Protagoras and the Sophists, the age when the art of persuasion—whose modern equivalent is advertising slogans, publicity, propaganda meetings, the press, the cinema, and radio—took the place of thought and controlled the fate of cities and accomplished coups d'état. So the ninth book of Plato's *Republic* reads like a description of contemporary events. Only today it is not the fate of Greece but of the entire world that is at stake. And we have no Socrates or Plato or Eudoxus, no Pythagorean tradition, and no teaching of the Mysteries. We have the Christian tradition, but it can do nothing for us unless it comes alive in us again."

Just so. It is not propaganda nor productivity nor intellectuality that has power to invigorate America at the crisis of the nation's fate. By virtue are nations defended. But virtue in this land of ours seemingly never lay at a lower ebb. The instruments of false persuasion listed by Simone Weil—the tools of the philodoxers, the purveyors of delusory opinion—have been increased in cleverness since she wrote, by the triumph of television. In no previous age have family influence, sound early prejudice, and good early habits been so broken in upon by outside force as in our own time. Moral virtue among the rising generation is mocked by the inanity of television, by

pornographic films, by the twentieth-century cult of the "peer group." By example and precept, until quite recently, grandparents and parents conveyed to young people—or a considerable part of them—some notion of virtue, even if the word itself was not well understood. The decay of family, worked by modern affluence and modern mobility, has mightily diminished all that. As for the influence of the churches—why, more is left of it in the United States than in most countries; but in the typical "mainline" church an amorphous humanitarianism has supplanted the emphasis upon virtue that runs through the Christian tradition.

And so we return, finding ourselves in circumstances very like those of the Greeks of the fifth century, to the ancient question, "Can virtue be taught?"

## II

LET ME CONFESS at once my inability to provide any simple formula, promptly applicable, for the widespread renewal of the pursuit of virtue. Some people fancy that if only schools would turn their attention systematically and earnestly to this problem, relief soon would follow. But it will not do to become so sanguine.

For Aristophanes was right, I believe, in proclaiming (in *The Clouds* and elsewhere) that moral virtue is not learnt in schools. If good moral habits are acquired at all, they are got ordinarily within the family, within the neighborhood, within the circle of close associates in youth; often good moral habits, or bad ones, are fixed by the age of seven, little more than a year after school has begun for the typical child. The early life of the household and the early life of the streets count for immensely much; and I need not try your patience by expatiating mightily on the sort of character (or lack thereof) formed by the childhood associations and impressions of a large part of our urban population—or, for that matter, our suburban population. I do not refer to the ADC slums merely. In the affluent household too, when parents' opinions and tastes are shaped by incessant watching of television, we need not wonder that children learn the price of everything and the value of nothing.

Boys and girls will model themselves, if they can, upon exemplars. But what sort of exemplars? Rock stars, and the fancied personalities of the heroes and heroines of the soap operas, have become the exemplars for a multitude of American young people in their most formative years. Rarely are such persons, or pseudo-persons, admirable mentors.

Enjoying the good fortune to grow up before television did, I found, when a boy, another sort of exemplar, who taught me of virtue by example, and to a lesser extent by precept: my grandfather, who died at my own present age. He was a generous and popular bank manager and local public man, who had a short way (several times) with bank robbers. Also he possessed important books, and read them and good periodicals, and helped to develop my own relish for reading. My grandfather was endowed with the cardinal and the theological virtues (if the latter in a form somewhat skeptical and heterodox). By conversing with him and watching him (he all unaware, probably, of the power of his influence upon me), I learned what it is to be a man.

At no time could every family provide such an exemplar; yet time was when emulation within the family amounted to more than it does nowadays. My relationship with my grandfather made it easy for me to understand Aristophanes' implicit argument that virtue arises easily, if mysteriously, among families. My grandfather had many virtues and no vices. I assumed then, somewhat naïvely, that the Republic had sufficient such leaders and molders of opinion as my grandfather, and would have enough such always.

But perhaps I digress. My point is this: the recovery of virtue in America depends in great part upon the reinvigoration of family. That is another subject, sufficiently vast in itself; perhaps I may be permitted to discuss it some day in another Heritage Lecture. It would be vain for us to pretend that schools and colleges somehow could make amends for all the neglect of character resulting from the inadequacies of the American family of the 'Eighties. With some few exceptions, men and women have acquired their virtues or their vices quite outside the classroom. (There comes into my mind's eye a glimpse of

Catholic young men, in a Jesuit university, diligently cheating at an examination concerning Aquinas' "On Truth.") If the family continues to decay in its functions, so will virtue continue to decline in our society. I offer you no placebo, in either the liturgical or the medicinal signification of that word. *Placebo Domino in regione vivorum?* Nay, but the man or woman brought up without moral virtue shall not be acceptable to the Lord in the land of the living.

Having turned liturgical for the moment, I venture a few words about the churches. Rather as some people expect too much from the schools concerning virtue, so other people count overly much upon churches and clergymen as molders of virtuous character. For Jeremy Bentham notwithstanding, the Church is not a moral police force. What the Church always has been meant to do, really, is to offer a pattern for ordering the soul of the believer; and to open a window upon the transcendent realm of being. It is true that mastery of the theological virtues ought to follow upon sincere belief, and that sometimes it does so follow. Certainly there would be little virtue in our civilization, and quite possibly there would exist no modern civilization at all, were it not for Christian preaching of the theological virtues. From the discipline of the theological virtues issue saints from time to time, as from the discipline of the cardinal virtues issue heroes. Yet it will not do to expect priest or minister to fill the vacuum left by the disappearance of family exemplar or mentor.

Now the churches of America, nevertheless, ought to do far more good work toward the renewal of virtue among persons than they actually are performing nowadays. I do not mean that the Church should become censorious as it was in Scotland in Knox's day, or as it was in New England in my great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather's years at Plymouth. I do mean that the Church ought to address itself less to prudential considerations of the hour's politics—at which business the Church usually demonstrates its incompetence—and much more to showing the pertinence of the theological virtues to our present discontents, private and public. Certain developments within theological colleges, here and there,

encourage me to think that such an alteration of approach has commenced. And it is altogether possible that a general widespread renewal of faith in the supernatural and transcendent character of Christian belief may come to pass within the next few years—a phenomenon more tremendous than the Great Awakening ushered in by Wesley and others two centuries ago. But to pursue that possibility here would lead me to the mysteries of the Shroud of Turin; I must stick to my last.

However that may be, the present influence of the Christian churches is not calculated to bring about much revival of the concept or the practice of the virtues, theological or cardinal. Most graduates of seminaries seem incapable today of discussing virtue, or particular virtues, with much historical or philosophical insight. For the moment, we must not look to institutional Christianity for rousing moral virtue; as Simone Weil suggests in the passage I quoted earlier, the Christian moral tradition lies dormant (at best) in modern hearts; if it is to come alive again, probably it must be revived by some outer power.

The moral virtue which grows out of habit being difficult of attainment in our era, people turn their attention to intellectual virtue. It was so in the fifth and fourth centuries before Christ. The whole great philosophical achievement of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, indeed, was an endeavor to impart intellectual virtue to the rising generation, moral virtue having shrivelled in an age when "the rude son may strike the father dead." Far from having much immediate practical effect upon the young people of their time, the effort of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle was a failure. (The fact that Aristotle schooled in philosophy a future great king did not produce any general alteration of minds and hearts.) Finding the old Greek religion and morality enfeebled, and moral habits much impaired, Socrates endeavored to substitute for habitual moral virtue the identification of virtue with wisdom: intellectual virtue. The immediate benefits of this venture were not obvious: Alcibiades and Critias were among Socrates' more successful disciples. Virtue of a sort was theirs; but not the virtue of moral worth.

Yet there have been times when intellectual virtue has been imparted successfully. Such, in British North America, was the second half of the eighteenth century, when there was developed a class of able persons (enduring as a class so late as the 1830s) who knew the meaning of virtue. Theirs was the schooling of English gentlemen of the age, deliberately intended to bring home the idea and the reality of virtue to those members of the rising generation presumably destined to be leading men of their society—whether (in Burke's phrases) "men of actual virtue" or "men of presumptive virtue." (This distinction is one between "enterprising talents" and inherited rank and wealth.)

And how were such young persons schooled in virtue? They were required to read carefully, in the classical languages (chiefly in Latin), certain enduring books that dealt much with virtue. In particular, they studied Cicero, Vergil, and Plutarch, among the ancients. They memorized Cicero's praise of virtuous Romans; they came to understand Vergil's *labor, pietas, fatum*; they immersed themselves in the lives of Plutarch's Greeks and Romans "of excellent virtue"—men in whom the energy of virtue had flamed up fiercely.

It does not follow that we, in our time, could produce such a generation of leaders as signed the Declaration and wrote the Constitution, were we suddenly to sweep all rubbish and boondoggle and driver training out of the typical American school curriculum, and install instead the required reading of 1775, say. For that study and reflection necessary for the attainment of intellectual virtue cannot unaided put flesh upon virtue's dry bones. For intellectual virtue to become active virtue—whether after the fashion of Washington or the fashion of Robespierre—favorable circumstances must occur. In the Thirteen Colonies, the altered relationships between Britain's Crown-in-Parliament and the dominant classes in America provided opportunity for the Americans schooled in virtue—particularly, though by no means exclusively, the men of actual virtue—to take power into their hands. And by 1832, the last survivors from America's intellectual-virtue school of earlier decades (John Quincy Adams, in particular)

were being thrust aside by men of another pattern.

It is possible for schools of intellectual virtue to endure a great while, and to exert a very strong practical influence. In essence, the famous public schools (together with many good "private" boarding schools) of England have been for centuries centers for imparting intellectual virtue to boys who presumably have obtained (most of them, anyway) a good deal of moral virtue within their own families. Such, at least, has been the aspiration of the British public schools, represented at their best by the ideas and methods of Dr. Thomas Arnold. Probably the days of the public schools and the boarding schools generally are numbered in Britain now. But the long history of those schools suggests that intellectual virtue was better imparted in England than in Greece. At the English schools, until recent decades, the core of the discipline of intellectual virtue was the study of Cicero, Vergil, Plutarch, and classical literature generally.

In these United States, scarcely a school remains, I suppose, where the notion of intellectual virtue still is entertained. A fair amount of the content of such studies, nevertheless, used to be conveyed by literary and historical courses in American intermediate and secondary schooling. That remnant has been trickling away—and not in America only. C. S. Lewis, four decades ago, assailed the corruption of school courses in humane letters in England; he found the new textbooks sneering at virtue of any sort. Great literature used to train the emotions, Lewis wrote:

"Without the aid of trained emotions the intellect is powerless against the animal organism. I had sooner play cards against a man who was quite skeptical about ethics, but bred to believe that 'a gentleman does not cheat,' than against an irreproachable moral philosopher who had been brought up among sharpers. In battle it is not syllogisms that will keep the reluctant nerves and muscles to their post in the third hour of the bombardment. . . . And all this time—such is the tragedy of our situation—we continue to clamour for those very qualities we are rendering impossible. You can hardly open a periodical without coming across the state-

ment that what our civilization needs is more 'drive,' or dynamics, or self-sacrifice, or 'creativity.' In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful."

We are worse off still, in the 'Eighties. So far, what attempts we have made in America to impart virtue once more have been confined principally to "research projects" (usually with plenty of public funds behind them) in that hideous sham called "values clarification." But I am descending into bathos.

Can virtue be taught? Why, it can be learnt, though more through a kind of illative process than as a formal program of study. Surely it cannot be taught by those incompetent and chameleon-like intellectuals whom Solzhenitsyn calls "the Smatterers." Few seem competent to teach virtue in our Republic nowadays; and relatively few hungry sheep look up to be fed.

Yet adversity, which we Americans seem liable to experience sharply and suddenly in

this present decade, frequently opens the way for the impulse toward virtue. The terrible adversity endured by decent folk in Soviet Russia forged the virtue of Solzhenitsyn, a hero for our age. Only rags and tatters of the old moral virtue survived in Russia after the triumphs of Lenin and of Stalin; Solzhenitsyn and some other Russians of moral vision found it necessary to raise up intellectual virtue from the ashes of revolution. They have succeeded, in the sense that Socrates and Plato succeeded; whether their reconstruction of virtue will take on flesh more swiftly than did the Greek reconstitution, we do not yet know.

"Feed men, and then ask them of virtue," is the slogan upon the banners of the Anti-Christ, in Solovyov's romance. We have done just that in this Republic, since the Second World War. We Americans have grown very well fed, very much starved for virtue. Nowhere is this more amply illustrated than in Washington. Whether or not virtue can be taught, we have not troubled our heads with it, or our hearts. When the Rough Beast slouches upon us, what Theseus or Perseus, incandescent with the energy of virtue, will draw his sword?