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Character Scholarship Community



Welcome to our thirty-fourth edition of "The Academic Journal," a bimonthly bulletin in which you can read about MCA's educational philosophy, instructional methodology, and the various viewpoints and positions of our faculty, staff, students, and families.

Teaching – Because The Soul Matters

Part 3: Virtuous Character

In the previous edition we explored the enduring standard of goodness, now let's think about goodness in terms of personal character. Virtue is a seldom-used word these days, but one that suits well our discussion. With its etymological roots in *vir* (man) and then in *virtus* (courage, excellence, character), virtue is the embodiment of strength, vigor, moral refinement, and a worthiness of deferential respect, in other words goodness lived out. Virtues flourish within the soul, then show up in behaviors, so virtuous behaviors are actually a reflection of who a person is, not just what he or she does. Virtuous behaviors are acts of the will considered in the mind and fueled by the heart.

According to Aristotle, there are three conditions for an action to be considered good: 1) we must understand what we are doing and why it is good; 2) we must freely choose the action, and 3) the action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character." (from *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle) A virtuous life is developed over time. We actually become virtuous. Being, therefore, is a higher priority than doing because who we are always determines what we do. Therefore, virtuous actions proceed from a love of what is virtuous.

In short, a virtuous person is predisposed to do what is good. Of course, there are gradations of virtuousness. Steve Wilkins (a professor of ethics at Azusa Pacific University) describes a variation of the story of the Good Samaritan. This Samaritan stopped to bandage and care for the wounded man on the side of the road, and then he went on his way. He became known as the "Pretty Good Samaritan." The Good Samaritan, in contrast, stopped to bandage and to care for the wounded man on the side of the road, and then sacrificially carried the wounded man to a nearby town and financially provided for his care. Being virtuous, furthermore, is not a cafeteria style of goodness in which a person goes down the line and selects from a variety of good traits. A woman might be described as showing virtues, such as compassion and generosity, because she gave money to those in need. However, it is a higher good to be a virtuous person because such a person regularly functions out of those traits. We might also consider generosity the virtue between stinginess and prodigality, and remorse the virtue between indifference and chronic guilt.

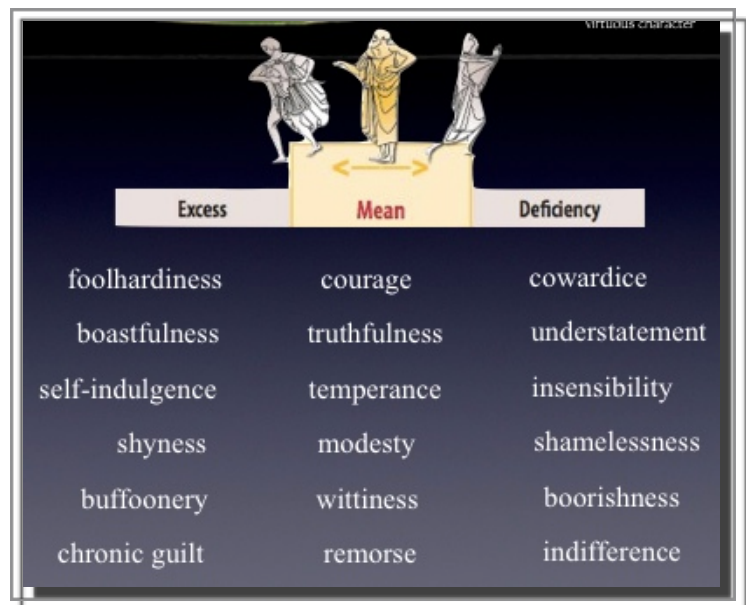
Then let us not leave the meaning of education ambiguous or ill-defined. We are speaking of education in virtue from the youth upwards, which makes a man eagerly pursue the ideal perfection of citizenship, and teaches him how rightly to rule and how to obey.

~Plato



Aristotle adds a very helpful dimension to the idea of virtue. Rather than pairing virtues at extremes, he says virtue is “a means between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect,” a golden mean sometimes closer to one extreme than the other (from Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle). Consider the high school wrestler who has just been congratulated on winning a hard fought state championship. He might respond, “Oh, I really didn’t do anything,” or “Thank you. I am truly grateful,” or “Of course, did you expect anything less?” The first answer would be an example of undue humility and the last an example of empty vanity, while the middle a model of proper pride. A detractor publicly calls out a young politician as being closed-minded (and by implication not open-minded) because she does not accept a particular, trending social view. How does she answer that double allegation from a point of virtue? “Well, sir, I would consider both of your categories as vices. If I were close-minded, I would not be willing to hear anything. If I were open-minded, I would be willing to accept everything. Instead I shall use discretion, weighing all reasonable arguments wisely.”

Virtues, like MCA’s “Expectations” and “Habits” are objective measures, gauging us all as more or less virtuous. “Then let us not leave the meaning of education ambiguous or ill-defined. We are speaking of education in virtue from the youth upwards, which makes a man eagerly pursue the ideal perfection of citizenship, and teaches him how rightly to rule and how to obey. This is the only education which, upon our view, deserves the name; that other sort of training, which aims at the acquisition of wealth or bodily strength, or mere cleverness apart from intelligence and justice, is mean and illiberal, and is not worthy to be called education at all.” (from Laws, Plato)



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