

WHY WORRY ABOUT VIRTUES?

Professor David Isaacs, University of Navarre, Spain

For a lot of people the word “virtue” sounds like something out of moral literature from the last century. Therefore virtues have no bearing on present-day life. What a mistake!

St. Thomas Aquinas states that a virtue is a good active habit. This makes the idea of virtue more attractive perhaps. There is another “definition”, though, which is even more practical. A virtue is that thing we love to find in others towards us but it is a thing awfully difficult to develop in our lives. We all like others to be understanding, generous, loyal, sincere and just to us.

We should be striving to improve ourselves in the same values. Only in this way can we progressively achieve further human maturity. Maturity can be understood as the result of the harmonious development of human virtues. And with maturity comes more happiness. Everyone wants to be happy. In a sense we are all condemned to want to be happy. We have no option. When we develop ourselves according to our nature, as children of God, we find more happiness, and this we can do in part through the development of human virtues.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF VIRTUE

Let us return to St. Thomas’ definition - “a good active habit”. This definition can pose a number of problems. For example: How does one develop a habit? There is only one answer, through repeating the same or similar acts several times. And this repetition comes because one has been demanding of oneself, or others have required us, to repeat an act. Parents will therefore require their child to repeat actions that lead to the well-being of the child. The responsibility to make demands and requirements of ones children for their own good is a loving expression of parental authority. Some feel that this could go against the child’s personal freedom and possibly produce some kind of trauma. I believe this to be false as illustrated by the following example.

What happens to an eighteen year old boy if someone invites him to play tennis? Theoretically he has two possibilities: Play or not play. But if he has never learned to play tennis, he has only one possibility - not to play. One can hardly say, then, that he is free. The same dynamic is involved in the exercise of the virtues. A capacity must be developed before one is free to use it

Theoretically an eighteen year old can be responsible. Practically speaking, however, without possessing the virtue he must start from scratch, so to speak, and he is not free to call immediately upon a quality, which exists within his character. He cannot exercise what he has not yet acquired. All the same its never too lat to begin He can always strive to do first one act of responsibility and then another, and so come to be responsible.

For this reason we can say that it is reasonable for parents to consider requiring their children to repeat certain acts. The children have the right to be required to do them so that they can then become free.

Another interesting aspect of the idea of virtue is to remember that the concept refers to the “Golden Mean) that means that any virtue, o good behavior has its opposite o~ bad behavior. These behaviors, which go against virtue, are called vices and all the virtues (except justice) have at least two vices against them, one for being the opposite and the other for being an excess of the virtue. You probably all know bout tie opposites - for example, orderliness and disorderliness, industriousness and laziness, patience and impatience. Many though, never think of vice as

being an excess of the virtue for example orderliness and “maniacs of order”, industriousness and frenetic, incessant, activity (one of the businessman 5 major vices which is now becoming more common among woman!) or patience and passivity.

Appreciating the moderation inherent in virtue is important for parents who could fall into the temptation of requiring too much of their children or not enough. We are looking for the “Golden Mean”. In fact, underlying all other moral virtues is the virtue of prudence. Because prudence is foundational, it is called a cardinal virtue. Prudence maintains the other virtues in their “Golden Mean” balance.

HOW TO EDUCATE IN VIRTUES

Again, education of virtue is a question of requiring the children to repeat acts but there are other factors as well. Motivation, development and the personal disposition of the child are all important. For a child to gain full possession of a virtue he/she must see as being reasonable. Thus understanding would lead to action. On the other hand, action also leads to understanding. With smaller children the most probable thing will be that we require them to do things, often without them understanding why. But little by little this focus should be changed to one in which we require the older youngsters to think before they make their own decisions.

To be successful in acquiring virtue at any age, it will be useful to center our attention on just a few things at a time. This would help anyone get better results, but it is especially beneficial for the little ones who might get discouraged from not seeing improvement. In this regard, one must also keep in mind that movement in the right direction is important. A common mistake made in virtue education is to look too intently on the perfection of the virtue and fail to recognize the progress and changes that are made. Without recognizing those little steps that are taken one runs the risk of discouraging our loved ones and possibly causing them to give-up prematurely.

The work of education in virtue has at least three levels of effect. First is the level of action. For example, the first effect of generosity might be an act of generosity, such as sharing ones toys. This is the level .of doing. Once the habit is established, it becomes a quality of the person doing the action. He or she becomes generous. This is the level of being. Finally, generosity comes to be understood as something worthwhile in itself. This is the level of value, a criterion one learns to apply to many situations and act upon. The final level of value allows the generous person to act generously in any situation; it is not limited to specific acts in specific situations. That is why the education of virtue is what we can call true values education.