Are "Values" the Same as Virtues?

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Introduction

When professional codes of conduct allude to 'personal values', and workplace controversies about issues of conscience are characterized as 'conflicts of values", it is past time to ask what meaning is conveyed by such terms. The author holds that values language "obscures moral discourse rather than furthers it." His short article serves as a suitable introduction to the subject.

Search for values brings boomers back to church;" so ran the heading of a recent Vancouver Sun article. The journalist interviewed various people who had left the church while young, but later brought their own children back. A church leader said the reason some young families are returning to church is that "they want some help in fostering values for their children." A mother of young children stated that it is at church that children can learn "what's right, what's wrong" so as to get a "moral education...."

Are these two people speaking about the same kind of things? Are "values" and "right and wrong" the same thing? It will surprise some people to realize that "values" is a term that obscures moral discourse rather than furthers it and that the term entered our language very recently. We all know, after all, that in contemporary usage, "you have your values and I have mine." A difference in "values" is virtually expected and no cause for concern.

So what does it mean when people speak of "Women's values" or "Christian values" or "Family values" as if the capitalized word in each phrase implies something that is objectively true? Precious little. In a values framework, those who think they are standing up for something like "family values" are actually squatting. The hopeful person at a school board meeting who thinks he or she is communicating something true when they speak of "Christian values" is mistaken. In the current climate, such an expression of view ends up sounding like this: "I speak of the values that a Christian like me holds." Yawn. Next speaker please.

When the woman in the above article said she hoped that her children would learn about "right and wrong" when they got a "moral education," she was not

speaking the same language at all as those who speak about values clarification in the schools. Attaching such terms as "Christian," "social," "Charter," or "women's" to the term "values" does not overcome the essential relativism of a values framework, and so, completely undercuts the objective good which the speaker thinks he or she is expressing. Each one is, after all, merely a personal (or group) value - if I am not of that group, there is no reason objectively why I ought to support the "value." And the content of values is, by definition, merely personal. The fragmenting tendency of such an approach to society is obvious.

What has not yet been sufficiently noted is that this "values" language has gradually overtaken the place previously occupied by the more robust framework of virtue and character education. "Values" are valid in relation to such things as aesthetic choices or what type food we prefer but we must be careful not to reduce the moral order to a question of merely personal preference. "Virtues," on the other hand, have specific application to an individual person in terms of that person's nature (Sally may be more courageous than Robert, thereby exhibiting more fully the moral virtue of courage). The virtue of courage would be discussed as something, in a sense, beyond each. All properly informed people would recognize the common and particular aspects of the virtues because they had been taught to recognize and describe them. Now educational materials in the public school (and most private schools) assist children in the task of "clarifying their own values" instead of teaching them. As such, it conforms them to chaos instead of informing them about meaning.

Now we make our own "values" rather than conform ourselves to "virtues" as the categorical aspects of an overall (and therefore shared) goodness. In such a situation, where reasoned debate itself is considered unnecessary in the face of power politics, we all have reason to fear a "values" approach that appears moral but is essentially relativistic. Yet, due to the lamentable watering-down of education over the past century, what was once basic to education and culture itself, is now largely lost. Since politics depends on culture and culture depends on the character of a people, a recovery of the tradition of the virtues is essential. A suspicion of reason goes hand in hand with a deeply ambiguous use of "values."

Perhaps a reasoned explanation of virtue will go some way to restoring confidence in both.

The writers of the classical period had various lists of virtues and divided them in different ways. Aristotle, for example, divided all the virtues into those that were moral (having to do with character) and those that were intellectual (having to do with the mind). Though others mentioned these virtues as important, it was a Christian thinker, Thomas Aquinas, who grouped four key virtues together as the cardinal virtues: justice, wisdom (prudence), courage (fortitude), and moderation (temperance or self-control). The term cardinal comes from the Latin word cardo (a hinge) because all the other virtues pivoted on these four. Wisdom was called the "charioteer of the virtues" because it guided all the other virtues. Finally, "Grace perfects nature" and the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity came to be seen as the supreme virtues, with the greatest of these being charity.

The concept of the mean (or "golden mean") recognizes that the virtues are the mean (or middle) between two extremes. Thus, courage is the mean (or middle way) between rashness (too much) and cowardice (too little). All errors with respect to the virtues involve either an excess or a deficiency of the virtue in question. Depending on our natures, we might have to move towards courage from either side of the mean. This is true for all the virtues and presents the drama of each person's

development of a virtuous character. Aristotle observed that an understanding of particular virtues was more helpful than simply being urged to "do good and avoid evil." The same applies to holiness. It is helpful to examine and practice the specific aspects that together make up a holy life.

That is the essence of the virtuous life - a dynamic rooted in the reality of our natures and the moral life. Great stories (scriptural and other) provide examples for reflection and education but need the "grammar" that the teaching of the structure of the virtues can provide. The difficulty is in getting access to such teaching nowadays. True education, as Augustine noted, is to learn what to desire. Since many obviously desire to be better informed about "virtues" and have been more or less suspicious of "values" language, it is hoped that the works listed below will provide some assistance in beginning the essential task of recovery and development of a robust understanding of virtue and character.

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•Peter C. Emberley, Values Education and Technology: The Ideology of Dispossession (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995)

•Stanley Hauerwas, Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974)

•Peter Kreeft, Back to Virtue (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992) n Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2nd. ed., 1984)

•Joseph F. Power, "[George]Grant's Critique of Values Language" in Larry Schmidt ed. George Grant in Process (Toronto: Anansi, 1978), pp. 90-98

•"Virtue and Vice" and "Habit" (and Scriptural references for each) in Mortimer Adler, ed. Syntopicon Vols. 2 & 3 of Great Books of The Western World (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 1952)

•"The Virtues" and "The Moral Law" in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1993), para. #1803 - 1845 and #1950 ff

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Iain T. Benson is a lawyer, lecturer and writer who travels and lectures widely in North America and overseas on topics related to law and culture (including medical ethics - - he served for a time on the ethics committee of a large Vancouver hospital). He has appeared on a variety of issues before House and Senate Committees and Royal Commissions and is invited frequently to be a guest on leading radio and television programs and in recent years has been heard on CBC Radio's "Ideas"; "Tapestry", "Commentary", "Cross-country Check-up" and on T.V. on the Learning Network and other programs across Canada. His writing has appeared in academic journals and major newspapers such as The Globe and Mail, The National Post, The Calgary Herald and The Ottawa Citizen. As Executive Director of the Ottawa based think-tank, The Centre for Cultural Renewal, Benson has established an International Research Council that numbers amongst its members leading thinkers at such institutions as Oxford and Cambridge in England, Princeton in the United States and Toronto and Queens in Canada.

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