

How Virtue is taught?

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Virtue is the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is. Iris Murdoch...

Crantor, a Greek philosopher who lived about three hundred years before Christ, relates that one day the divinities like Wealth, Pleasure, Honor, Health and Virtue, suddenly appeared before the throng (crowd) at the Olympic games and asked the judges of the Areopagus (The highest judicial and legislative council of ancient Athens.) to decide which of them most favorably influenced man's happiness. Wealth dazzled for a moment the judges' eyes, but Pleasure soon showed that he was only a means to her as an end. Honor claimed that Wealth and Pleasure were but things of a day unless linked to lasting renown, but then up rose Health and declared that without her all three were practically worthless. Virtue ended the dispute by making all the Greeks admit that even glory is but transitory, and that Wealth, Pleasure, Honor, and Health, without Virtue, become evils for those who do not know how to use them with discretion.

In this Paper an attempt has been made to understand "How Virtue is taught?" and why virtue is important for life. The first question implies two questions,

1. Is virtue teachable to at least one man?
2. Second, if virtue can be taught to at least one man, can it be taught to any man?

We must clarify the meaning and concepts about virtue: what is virtue? Virtue is the quality of man which discerns right from wrong. It first requires having the knowledge of what is right and what is wrong, and then requires a mental judgment about it. Virtue is all about three things:

1. The knowledge of right and wrong,
2. The ability to discern right from wrong and
3. The finally the right action that man takes.

Virtues are desirable ways of relating to other individuals, groups, and organizations. They have much to do with motives, attitudes, and emotions, as they do with right and wrong conduct. Virtue makes possible a harmonious society likewise a harmonious society allows us to cultivate the virtues. To act ethically often requires a high degree of virtue.

Cultivating Virtue:

The ethics of virtue is concerned with character traits. But character traits do not just happen. They need to be consciously developed and sustained, both by the people whose character traits they are and by others around them: like parents, teachers, role models, and the community at large. A little child is like a plant, they need seeding and nurturing and regular attention in order to be proper. This is what is called the cultivation of virtues*1. Cultivating virtues is all about "heart work" Virtue training involves working on the inside of the person – the heart – more even than changing the outside behaviors. Cultivating virtues means connecting with your children at their "heart" level. Virtue development is to guide your child to personally commit to what is right and good. Learning comes in many forms. Learning does not require a teacher in the strict sense. For example, one can learn from studying and emulating virtuous people. To some extent the virtues can be taught directly. They can be identified, praised and rewarded early stages, by parents and later by schools and society. For example Discipline which is imposed from outside, it is gradually internalized to become, later "Self – Discipline".

Aristotle in his Nicomachean Ethics defined the virtues as acquired habits that enable us to engage effectively in rational activities – activities that define us as human beings. He regarded wisdom or good judgment as the most important virtue. Good judgment is necessary for successful rational activities that range from engineering to philosophical inquiry.

Even if other virtues like empathy, generosity, hospitality comes from heart or perhaps they are "innate", but even so, that people can lose them without the proper development and support. This context is quite contrary to Plato's Meno Dialogue in which the voice of Socrates concludes that virtue cannot be taught and is a faculty given by the gods.

Confucius (551–479 BCE) a Chinese philosopher, for him cultivating the virtues is a social project*2. Virtue is not something we discover for ourselves; it is shown to us, daily, in the action of those most visible and most admired. A man's training of his sons clearly reflects his own virtue or lack of it.

Practice is Essential:

In the individual moral life especially, practice is crucial to cultivating virtue. Think psychologically for a moment. A character trait is a reliable disposition to act in certain ways in certain specific circumstances. Another term we could use is "Habit". But habit needs practicing. The simplest principle of psychology is that habits are established and grow stronger with repetition. So, to promote and engrain virtue in oneself, repetition

is the key. Honesty, hospitality, temperance, and all the rest won't come from settled character traits simply by choice or commitment. We have to be honest, be hospitable, and practice temperance, again and again and again. Moral character is ongoing project can be achieved only through virtue.

Sometimes we are inclined to excuse our moral lapses by arguing that we couldn't help ourselves. "Circumstances made me to do it" And it may well be true that, faced with specific temptations with no settled habits of resistance or redirection, temptations are hard to resist. The contrary power does not necessarily lie in a pure act of will at the moment of choice. The power lies with the reconstruction of our habits. John Sullivan is emeritus professor of philosophy at Elon University his question was how to win ourselves he answers it by saying one has be aware of one's awareness which is very crucial. Sullivan says response – ability arises when we come to recognize that our ways of understanding and responding to events and experiences are themselves choices, and then practice making different and more conscious ones. Response – ability is both a key virtue in itself and also means by which other virtues can be cultivated and deepened.

Confucius would say we have a small – minded person – in – us and a noble or large – minded person – in – us both possibilities existing at any moment, He would encourage us to remember our nobility and to live in large mind. He would remind us that this takes daily practice. What is "practice" on this model? It is to recognize when we are in small mind and to shift to large mind.

In small mind, we tend to be partial in the double sense of being biased and of seeing less than the whole. In small mind we are asleep in our life, in small mind we are enslaved and reactive in the sense that someone or something triggers us and we react immediately with no space and no time between the incoming stimulus and the automatic response.

In large mind, we see more of the whole and live in a larger world. In large mind, we are more mindful, more wakeful, opening the sense and opening the heart. In large mind, we are response – able which mean able to choice our response in a way that benefits the whole. Practice begins with recognizing when we are in small mind. To do this we must distinguish two levels – a WHAT and a HOW. This is the fundamental distinction for all inner work. The distinction between (a) What is going on and (b) how I am relating to what is going on.

Conclusion

In summary, the Greek philosopher Plato says that virtue is knowledge, the ability to discern right from wrong, and act towards that right end. Virtue opens up to a good and meaningful life. They guide us to live morally, control our emotions and avoid what is sinful. In doing so, virtue help us to become "fully human" and tap into the rich potential given to us by God. Developing a virtuous life is a long process, it takes a great deal of time and energy to become skilled at choosing what is right.

Virtue can be taught to anyone who desires to learn virtue. People, who teach themselves, learn through studying others, through experience, and through personal reflection. Men who want to learn but need a teacher, under the guidance of a teacher he learns the first knowledge of the moral standards in a common situation, then learning the techniques to help him act virtuously in a practical way. If a man does not desire to learn virtue, he has to be persuaded by reason why virtue is important in life. When the man is persuaded by reason, then he changes his behavior on his own volition. When he is persuaded by force, he changes his behavior by necessity. I would like to conclude by saying that by any means we can persuade men to seek virtue. We can teach them knowledge of right and wrong. We can teach them techniques to act virtuously. Therefore, virtue can be taught, and it can be taught to anyone.

Remember that cultivating virtue in your children (as well as yourself) is a long term process and exciting work. It is a "two steps forward and one step backwards" journey. You find contentment and joy in the slow and steady progress that is made.

Reference

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