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Insight Series

## The Return to Virtue: Some Reflections

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## The Return to Virtue: Some Reflections

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When you think of virtue, what comes to mind? Your thinking on this will often depend on whether you are liberal or conservative, religious or secular. It is certainly a word that has been plagued by a great deal of confusion and some of the text book answers can often leave us cold. For example, virtue is often defined as 'a habitual and firm disposition to do good', but this in practice is often reduced to promoting the fallacy that it is our sole responsibility to eliminate vice from our lives. I think it is better to begin with a question that has preoccupied humanity from the very beginning: What is the best way to live? Philosophers, politicians, and ordinary citizens have all argued about this question and about the practical ways to organise society. Unfortunately, to-day's information explosion means that we are thinking less and less about more and more. But, what if we decided to focus more on virtue as the ultimate organising principle for ourselves and society? What would this look like?

None of us are of course born virtuous. Virtue must be sought and can only be acquired by continued practice. Just as you would learn to ride a bicycle by riding a bicycle, you become virtuous by practising virtue. Virtue, I believe, leads to better citizens, better ways of living, better relationships, and ultimately a better world. There is undoubtedly a strong connection between virtue and human flourishing – indeed I would go so far to say that even our desire for happiness is best satisfied by the acquisition of virtue. For example, two virtuous people will have a better and more satisfying relationship than two people without virtue. Two honest people will always have a better relationship with each other than two liars. In the same way two humble people will always have a better relationship than two proud people. Indeed, if we are all striving to live virtuous lives our relationships will prosper and by extension society will also prosper. The best way to encourage genuine virtue is to encourage citizens to appreciate the rewards of the virtues themselves, both for their happiness and flourishing, as well as that of society.

With the aid of Julia Annas's excellent *Intelligent Virtue* (2011) we can summarise what virtue is and what it encourages within us:

Virtue(s).....

A lasting feature of a person

A tendency for a person to be a certain way

It develops through selective responses to circumstances It is not a static condition

Is it a reliable disposition

It is a disposition which is characteristic of a person It is not only about acting but also about reacting

A virtuous person is acting in and from character

A disposition expresses itself in, perceiving, acting, feeling and comporting oneself in a certain reason-infused (as distinct from a merely reason-controlled) way

To become virtuous takes time It requires habit not routine

It requires experience, reflection and understanding

It requires education and formation by parents, teachers, and culture It requires a response that is appropriate to the situation

It is an essentially developmental notion

It is always learnt in an embedded context It is valued for its own sake

A commitment to goodness is a distinguishing factor in its acquisition It is an ideal, and is inspiring in nature

You cannot learn the virtues one by one

They lead to an integrated life

It is clear to me that virtue ought to be valued as something good and be seen as a character trait of a good moral quality in a person. Being virtuous therefore is intimately connected with good citizenship and the well-being of society. It is an essential pre-stage of good citizenship. Virtues are centrally relevant to all the roles we take on in life and help us to develop the right motive for what we do take on.



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*The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues or The University of Birmingham.*

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