An Approach to Teaching Virtue in Schools

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1. Introductory

Most schools try to help raise good kids. As educators and administrators, we want them to be happy, successful, flourishing adults. To aid in that, we teach them how to read, write, think about numbers and functions analytically, and to understand history and the physical sciences. All of this contributes to raising what we'd call a good person. Yet we also want them to make good choices and build good characters—to be nice, empathetic and motivated; to help others in need; and to contribute to one's community. Is there a study for that? Can that behavior be learned? Hoping that it can be, more and more schools have been integrating ethics into their students' curriculum maps. Many of those schools have adopted a generic curriculum from introductory college courses (sometimes simplified versions). Yet these curricula don't claim to teach students how to be good people. Instead, they present an historical telling of the metaethical dialogue, highlighting the merits and downfalls of each program by introducing practical cases. Schools whose mission is, in part, to create ethical students can't accomplish that with a curriculum built around standard metaethics. Nothing about that approach helps our students become better people. I begin this essay by discussing the importance of having a functional system for using normative language. Then, I explain why normative language becomes functionless when it's tied too tightly to one or another ethical system. Lastly, I argue that fixing normative language on specific virtues allows for the greatest linguistic flexibility; it also accurately characterizes the choices we make and the normative language we use to describe those choices.

2. The Difficulty of Normative Language

The history of ethics is a history of wrestling with normative language. That's not to say we have always obsessed over the semantics of words like 'good' and 'bad', but whatever *is* good or bad, or whatever we should or should not do, must be expressible in truth-bearing statements. Such truth-bearing, ethical statements are normative: the statement tells one how to fix something that's gone wrong, or how to stay—as it were—*normal.* Grammar teaches that declarative statement have a truth-bearing formula: 'The car is in the driveway,' 'The train is scheduled to depart at 8:12,' 'I am a teacher, and your blank stare worries me.' Each of these statements is true or false, and we likely agree as to what makes them so. We are putting forth a description of the world. On the other hand, the statement 'I *will* drink my tea once it cools' is not obviously true, since we don't know whether it will happen—it's about the future! If it does, then the helping verb 'will' will no longer be included in the formula, and so the original statement is only true *ex post facto*. There are loads of other helping verbs that make our attempts at truth much hazier. For its part, normative helping verbs have also been hauntingly difficult.

The modals 'should' and 'ought' are maddingly opaque. They frustrate in part because they are so obvious and useful: we all use them and we basically know what we mean when we say them. If I tell my daughter, 'You should wash your hands before helping prepare dinner,' it's clear that I am telling her

to wash her hands. It's stronger than a polite suggestion. If I tell her, 'You should buy a fish with your birthday money,' I am giving a suggestion. And if I say, 'you should help clean up the mess you helped create,' I am giving an ethical command of sorts. Like future tense statements, everyone uses normative language, and in social situations at least, we do quite a lot. We mostly treat normative statements as having truth value, and the ubiquity with which we proffer our own normative statements and react to others is, I think, uncontroversial.

The study of what makes normative statements true is metaethics. Ethicists who tackle metaethics are compelled to *prove* goodness (behavior, choices, etc.) as part of the fabric of the universe. Immanuel Kant and J.S. Mill are both victims of this tendency, and while there are many updated variations of deontological and consequentialist systems, I will focus primarily on these heavy-hitters since they have the oldest, most popular, and complete arguments.[1] What they share is a desire to provide the truth conditions for normative language; they are trying to reveal which part of the universe holds the ethical facts, and to tell us how we can know them. Such a project turns the ethicist into a metaphysicist.[2]

The first and most obvious sticking point is the weirdness of normative modals and predicates. It's not that the words themselves are strange. No, they are easily among the most used in dialogue. The problem is that our use of normative language generally takes the form of declarative statements, which purport to say something true. Most declarative statements, however, have discernible truth conditions—we know what makes them true or what *would* make them true. Some are easy to know: 'I am baking a cake' or 'Owen has red hair.' Others are much harder: 'The universe is infinite' or 'There is no largest prime.' And still others will shift with changing information: 'Pluto is a planet.' Normative statements aren't knowable in the same way. 'Pluto *should* be a planet' and 'One *shouldn't* eat cake for dinner' are statements whose truth values are buried in mystery. We have metaethical explanations that tell how to deal with normative truth, but it's not obvious we should accept those explanations. To illustrate this, I will discuss generic versions of Kant's and Mill's ethical philosophies. I am not offering anything like an analytical refutation of either position, but instead trying to point out a pedagogical shortcoming. If we require a standard metaethical system to ground normative truth, then one of them must be acceptable—and not just acceptable, but demonstrably true.

For his part, Kant rests his conception of goodness on moral duty.[3] A good action is one generated by a rational agent who acts with direct regard for her moral duty. One's moral duty is defined as obeying the moral law *because* reason requires it. A rational agent is compelled to act from the moral law on pain of being irrational. A good action, therefore, is one in which the rational agent acts rationally, where acting rationally is defined as acting *from* the moral law. The moral law is given to us through the categorical imperative. Should we buy this picture? According to Kant, we have no choice. It's built into the very idea of rationality. Yet, it's also reasonable to ask how we know that ethics

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[1] Not everyone thinks Mill is a consequentialist, I know, and I have no problem with that. My point here does not turn on him being consequentialist but on his principle of utility *grounding* normative truth.

[2] I avoid using the more common term 'metaphysician' because of its proximity to 'physician', who is a healer. Those who study metaphysics are analogous to those who study physics (as Aristotle delineated the two), and since we call them physicists, it makes more sense to call the analogue metaphysicists. There are probably some metaphysicians out there, but I imagine their work is a lot more spiritual than what we do in philosophy these days.

[3] Note: I do not distinguish ethics and morality in this paper.

is a function of rationality, which requires taking on Kant's substantial metaphysics. Accepting Kant's ethics means accepting his metaphysics, which isn't easy.

Mill's argument relies on tying goodness to happiness. Utilitarianism is Mill's way of discussing ethical behavior in terms of maximizing human well-being. The generic utilitarian formula states that the correct action is the 'one that promotes the greatest happiness for the greatest number,' but over the years we have seen numerous variations of this principle. Like Kant, Mill recognizes normative truth's slipperiness. Providing truth conditions for normative statements clearly troubled Mill, which he more or less confessed in his section "Of What Sort of Proof the Principle of Utility is Susceptible." The short answer is that there is no proof—not at least in the way Kant offered it. There is still plenty of disagreement over Mill's "proof of the principle of utility", but he identified a popular thread: happiness is a intuitive marker for goodness, and whether people are happy is largely observable. Mill still leaves open the question of why we should accept happiness as the truth condition for what's ethical. Should the greatest possible happiness determine the truth of normative statements? It's certainly not obvious.

Most of the literature on ethics hovers between deontology and consequentialism, in part because they seem to cover the conceptual spectrum of proof: normative truth conditions can either be found in universal duties that exist prior to one's action or in the material consequences of it. Each program has its staunch supporters. But over the centuries we have been able to draw a few important conclusions:

1. Providing truth conditions for normative language is extremely difficult.

2. Convincing people that these truth conditions are the right ones is extremely difficult.

3. There is nothing even close to a consensus about which are the correct truth conditions.

If (1) were false, then (2) and (3) would also be false. While I won't analyze the woes of normative ethics, I think these three conclusions are immensely instructive in thinking about the study of ethics and pedagogy. Any introductory ethics instructor knows how easy it is to present Kant in a vacuum, cherry-pick examples, and lead students to buy into his program. That instructor is also very aware how easy it is to get students to turn on Kant by presenting Mill's program by cherry-picking counterexamples with which the orthodox Kantian struggles. We can do the same experiment beginning with Mill and then presenting Kantian counterexamples.[4] Good instructors can present virtually any time-tested ethical program he or she wants, present the best possible cases, and get students to believe that program. The problem is that the strength of one program is contrary to the strength of the other. Kant and Mill can't both be right, and we know that. And we are forced to reveal that quandary to our students. By the end of the course, we have filled our students' heads with competing claims to normative truth and no one can say which, if any, is correct.

It's naïve to suppose younger students will fare any better than the confused college students.[5] Those who fare better will have thought deeply about some of philosophy's most challenging questions; they will know about the history and arch of the conversation; they may even gather some personal insight. There is no evidence, however, that these more motivated and inspired students become any

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[4] We're all quite familiar with the Nazi example and the Trolley Problem.

[5] Let me be clear, I do not mean to say that *all* introductory students have this problem. Obviously, some (like us) go on to pursue the study, even into graduate school and professional life. Yet, that is the vast minority.

closer to 'getting it right'[6] nor are they more ethical for having studied it.[7] If schools are asking whether we can help students make better choices, act more ethically, and in general build better characters, then we have a very different question on our hands.

Perhaps we should we put aside the desperate attempt at fixing normative truth and work with what we have? Does it make sense for the sake of pedagogy to abandon metaethical study to practice one ethical doctrine? The major problem is that normative truth is fixed so narrowly that goodness applies to only one formulation: reason or happiness, e.g.[8] and no amount of posturing will get everyone to buy into one or the other program, mostly because, for it to make sense, it must exclude so much.

3. Introducing Virtue

Teaching virtue as the basis for normative truth is pedagogically useful, and I argue that it should be the basis of our schools' ethics curricula. In what follows, I will give a brief and limited defense this idea, keeping the following theses at the forefront. First, I am advocating a very particular and sufficiently general conception of virtue. Second, I am not claiming that there is anything like a 'proof' that virtue anchors normative language; it's a pragmatic method consistent with our intuitions of . Third, while I think there is lurking a more robust defense of virtue ethics, in this paper I am only pointing to its relative pedagogical value—which is immense. As I have seen the language of virtue introduced into schools and classrooms, I have seen the development of better students.

I am very aware that I am presupposing in advance what counts as good. A common critique from metaethicists is that an ethical curriculum can't be introduced unless we know what counts as ethical—what grounds normative truth. Not only is this misguided, but it's dishonest. Kant and Mill had deep-seated views on, among other vices, lying, and their ethical programs were built to account for those idiosyncrasies. More recently, various reflective techniques have been proposed to account for the ranging ethical intuitions, and at least with 'reflective equilibrium,' the principles are adjusted to meet the needs of the intuitions. It's plainly wrong to suggest that we can't be privy to ethical principles until we get straight on our metaethics.[9] Not surprisingly, nearly every popular ethical system condemns and promotes the same behaviors, and I think there's good reason for this. Most mainstream views promote prudent and just behavior but not infidelity and murder. And while there's so much to say about why this is, I think it's pedagogically appropriate to accept it at face value.[10]

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[6] Evinced by our own lack of progress or even consensus in metaethics.

[7] Eric Schwitzgable, for one, thinks it might make you less ethical! See "The Moral Behavior of Ethicists" (2016), Companion to Experimental Philosophy, ed. J. Sytsma and W. Buckwalter (Wiley-Blackwell)

[8] I'm focusing on Kant and Mill here, but I should note that for similarly reasons I am equally unsatisfied with every variation of their torchbearers.

[9] Or maybe we can't, but it's hypocritical to say that we shouldn't. Whether the principles are correct can be evaluated by the metaethical flavor of the day.

[10] There is, of course, an element of smuggling in thick ethical concepts. Murder, by definition, is unjust killing, so even the worst acts of criminal killing are probably described by the killer as just (and therefore *not* murder). I don't take that as a strike against accepting standard virtues, and hope that it makes the virtues that much more appealing. Even if we disagree about what counts as murder, we can still agree that murder is vicious.

4. Under a Description

Perhaps one of Elizabeth Anscombe's most underrated contributions is her insistence that actions are describable in many ways—that an action can have many descriptions.[11] The significance of this observation rests not on a view about action identity, but on the subtlety of capturing behavior in language. In "Modern Moral Philosophy", Anscombe takes Kant to task over his understanding of actions. She notes his 'obsession' with the concept of lying and his refusal to see a lying as anything but just a lie.[12] Anscombe also critiques his lack of sophistication in action-descriptions when formulating maxims.[13] For my part, I share Anscombe's worry, but even more, I can appreciate how alleviating it is to break from standard, 'old-school' focus on higher-order action descriptions. We have focused so heavily on including the *categorization* of the action in the description itself, such as in the infamous 'lying to the Nazi' who's at your door, or 'Killing one instead of letting five die' in the Trolley Problem. But 'lying' and 'killing' aren't standard descriptions of events—they're higher-order characterizations. How one acts when the Nazi appears at the door will depend on what he says and so much more (how he's dressed, what type of building you have, the weather outside, and so on). In the most straightforward case, however, the Nazi asks, 'Are you hiding anyone illegal?' Assuming you are, and you're doing so deliberately, and you still say, "No, I am not" then you have told a lie. This hypothesized scenario makes people hopelessly anxious, especially if one's ethical code outlaws lying.[14] No one wants to give up the innocent victim. Even Kant blames similar situations on the perpetrator failing to act rationally in the first place. Even so, the door-answerer did right in giving up the victim because he told the truth, since the *only* possible behaviors at this moment are lying or not lying. Kant wants the door-answerer to rest assured: not only did you perform ethically, but cosmic justice to take care of the Nazi—*post mortem*. It's surreal. To Kant, it's rational; to the rest of the world, it's frankly not an option. I've never met a learner to whom this made any sense, and the intuitions triggered in these cases serve as the standard counterexamples for Kant's program. Such intuitive objections don't faze Kant, but intuitions are powerful, and are indicators that teaching ethical conduct can't ignore.

According to Anscombe, what Kant fails to recognize is that saying "No," isn't *just* an act of lying. Lying isn't the essential way of describing the behavior itself, it is a higher-order characterization. Lying depends not only on what's said (or not said), but the context in which it's said. It depends on the material facts of the situation in addition to the actor's specific behavior and his or her aim. Misjudgments are not lies in the ordinary sense. Imagine someone chokes down a mouthful of cookie but tells someone else he's eating cake. It may have been a mistake: forgetfulness or slip of the tongue. Saying he's eating cake *could* be a lie if, for example, his purpose in saying, 'I'm eating cake' is to mislead the listener. Let's say he was not supposed to eat the cookie, and the cake was fair game, but he really badly wanted the cookie and believe eating just one wouldn't matter. The point is that lying depends on a lot more than the words said; it's a wider characterization of the entire situation. In the Nazi case, the door answerer isn't just 'lying in order to save someone.' Saying 'No' is the brute way of describing what's happening, and the goal is to 'save an innocent person's life'. Saying 'No' is a part of an effort to

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[11] Anscombe, G.E.M., *Intention*. Harvard (1957)
[12] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy 33,* No. 124 (January 1958)
[13] Maxims are the principles capable of evaluation be the categorical imperative.
[14] I know someone claims saying "No" *isn't* lying because, by definition, lying must be wrong, and this isn't wrong. His *modus tollens* led him to a very bizarre explanation having something to do with the Nazi not being connected to reality.

'Mislead the Nazi', which is part of the effort to ' Save an innocent life.' Thus, saying 'No' is characterizable as an act of lying, but the very same action can be described in other, more fundamental ways. These ways are evidently virtuous. If we don't focus on the nuance of action descriptions, then what is a very complex, subtle ethical situations look like a simple dilemma—which misses the struggle of real life. Focusing on the nuances also helps reveal why our students make tough choices when, to us, a more virtuous option seems obvious.

5. Setting Normative Language

My central thesis is this: our normative language ought to reflect the relationship between action and virtue. In the previous example, saying 'No' is an act of lying but also of salvation. There are

two ways of describing what happens. We can say that one 'should not lie' and 'should save the innocent'. In this case, it was both: they were both a consequence of the same description. Lying isn't necessarily the *goal* but it is a fact of how the situation unfolds. In Anscombe's lexicon, it's not intentional despite being voluntary. It's not the only way to save the person, but it might be the most effective, the safest, the easiest.

Here's an example to flesh out this point. Imagine I chop down a birch tree near my home in order to make a birdhouse and begin restocking my firewood. Imagine after I fell the tree, I realize there is a robin's nest in it—the eggs having fallen out. Because, in this case, building the birdhouse includes chopping down the tree, I can say chopping down the tree is part of building the birdhouse. It contains that intentional structure. I would *not* also say that I chopped down the tree in order to destroy the robin's eggs any more than I'd say I destroyed the robin's eggs in order to build the birdhouse - despite the incredible irony. I did all these and more; they are all true descriptions of my behavior. I'm feeling rather crummy about the robin's nest, and it was no doubt a harmful enterprise. A bird was displaced, and her offspring squashed. *I* did these actions. I *should not* have cut down that tree. The normative 'should not' highlights not only my regret, but also the wrongness of it. Harming the bird, her eggs and nest, was wrong.

Suppose the very next day, I plan to chop another tree for firewood. I really want to harvest this balsam fir because I enjoy the smell of burning pine. It's the only mature one on my lot, but I notice in advance there's also bird's nest in it. I curse myself and decide that I *shouldn't* chop down the tree. My friend Sean disagrees. He thinks I *should*. Notice here that we are both using normative language. Our statements purport to say something true about the world, but which one of us is right? If I'm an ethical realist—as most of our students are—I can't just agree to disagree. It's not *just* a matter of opinion. Either I should cut it down or I shouldn't.[15] Sean tells me I shouldn't care so much about the bird, and that the firewood is more important. I tell him that I should care and that the bird's life has value, too. How am I supposed to sift through this problem? These really are the ethical problems that we and our young people face daily.

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[15] I realize that Kant would say it's merely permissible and that normative language isn't being used properly here—we're using hypothetical imperatives. I don't buy it, however. This is truly representative of the way we talk, and my point is to represent it accurately.

I argue that we need to refocus our normative language to highlight specific virtues. *Should* and *ought* are terms that are roughly synonymous with "it would be good if…" The 'good' in this formulation is an identifiable virtue. 'I should cut down the tree' becomes 'It would be good if I cut down the tree,' and 'good' gets defined by whoever's making that judgment. The good in cutting it down is its use-value—the virtue of utility or efficacy, which is an instrumental virtue. If the claim is that I should not, then there is presumably a virtue—something good—in avoiding the action. What seems clear is that anytime the judgment is made, that one should or should not do something, there is something good or bad identifiable in the judgment. In some sense, Sean and I disagree about whether to cut down the tree. But the gap isn't as wide as it may seem. One of us is right and the other is wrong on the standard conception of normative truth. Yet in this case, Sean and I have no problem agreeing on the virtues of the situation. Cutting down the tree is both good and bad under different descriptions: 'making firewood' is expedient for heating my house and 'harming a bird's nest' is inconsiderate. Sean doesn't believe that 'harming the bird's nest' is part of 'making firewood'—or 'heating my house' for that matter—but he does recognize it as a consequence of felling this tree. My concern is for the bird more than it is the wood, while his is for the wood.

Let me be clear about what I am proposing. Kant and Mill have argued for very narrow interpretations of normative truth. For Kant, I should act rationally; for Mill, I should maximize happiness. Each gives his best effort to convince us that these are the true grounds for ethics. Those of us teaching this subject, however, recognize that there isn't frequent buy-in. Their definitions are effectively stipulative, but no holds tightly to these definitions in tough cases. Defining normative truth in one way requires living and dying by the same principle.

6. The Virtues

How about the virtues? Why are *they* good? I've tried to leave no room for this question. Actions can be good insofar as they are virtuous, but the virtues themselves are not good. I know this departs from much of contemporary virtue ethics, which attempts to undergo the traditional metaethical task of unveiling where normativity fits into the universe. Some argue the virtues are 'natural' or 'rational' or merely 'conventional'. Pedagogically, I'm not interested in that question any more than I think Aristotle was. For good reason, he mostly assumed that justice is worth pursuing. Identifying the conceptual boundaries of justice makes for an interesting topic, no doubt, but that's a separate project. In the classroom, in the school, and in one's everyday dealings, we agree for the most part one which actions are just. We just don't always agree that justice should be pursued *over* other virtues (honor, loyalty, self-preservation, pleasure, etc.).

It's reasonable to wonder what *are* the other virtue? I suggest the scope of virtues should be as wide as possible, and we can determine the scope by observing our behavior.[16] What we're looking for is how we use our normative language, how our declarative *should*-statements appeal to good *qua* virtue. Let us peer into our normative dealings and figure out what good we see in the matter.[17] There is a good

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[16] The scope of 'our' in 'our behavior' can be as universal or local as one likes: clique, class, school, community, region, nation, humanity.

[17] This thought has a similar flavor as Candace Vogler presents in *Reasonably Vicious*. Harvard Press (2002).

chance that one appeals to some popular virtues: prudence, utility, justice, honesty, generosity, friendship, courage, pleasure. There will be more.

Like Kant and Mill, I am stipulating a definition for normative truth, but I am proposing a vast grab bag of virtues. Any virtue will do, frankly. An action is good if and only if it has a description that makes it virtuous. And since an action may have lots of descriptions, it can be good (or bad) in many ways. The upshot is that we capture both Kantian logical consistency and Millian happiness as virtues. The breadth of goodness here allows for lots of participants. Virtue is an inclusive, not exclusive, system.

7. Instrumental Virtues, Dispositional Virtues, and Anecdotes

I am also aware that there are virtues—indelibly worthy ones—at which we don't typically *aim*. 'Empathy', for example is a virtue one can possess by aiming at other virtues. Showing generosity in times of need can demonstrate empathy. Similarly, temperance is a trait that one hopes to show when emotions are running high. It's not something usually aimed at but a characterization of how one reacts to emotional situations. Temperance is a dispositional virtue. I teach my students that goodness describes *all* virtues even if not all virtues characterize actions as well as they do individual characters. I encourage my students to embody all the virtues; we talk about what that looks like by signaling people (friends, classmates, teachers, book characters) who possess such virtues, even

if it's a rather vicious person who possesses at least one worthy trait.[18] When, for example, Sherlock Holmes experiments with cocaine or opium, we recognize that he tells himself that these are worthy pursuits. Perhaps he also considers their harmfulness. He sees drug use as useful way of stimulating or quieting his mind when not on a case. For him, using these substances is good *qua* helpful. They serve his purpose; he *should* use them. Yet, he *shouldn't* use them because the consequences are potentially medically imprudent. And the dialogue goes on. Eventually Holmes, the incredibly perceptive detective and skilled deliberator, decides and reveals something about his character. Under certain conditions, Holmes has the disposition to use mind-altering substances. It's not an 'all-things-considered' good or bad, should or should not do, decision. There isn't *a* right way of acting, but *many* right ways.

As teachers and mentors, nothing is easier than pointing fingers at students and highlighting their poor decisions, but doing so fails to appreciate their ethical creativity. They aren't stupid; many of them simply possess the disposition to favor certain virtues over others. In many ways, they are like Holmes. When, and only when, we acknowledge the virtues they gravitate toward, and help them understand their own dispositional tendencies, can we ask them to consider alternate choices. We cannot simply tell them they made a poor or unethical choice; we need them to understand what's at stake in their deliberations.

Last year one of my students submitted a plagiarized essay. Rather than scold his poor choice and award disciplinary action, I talked with him about the actions he took, the decisions he made. In this case, he didn't lift the whole essay but took parts from various internet sources. He and I discussed those parts and his decisions to include the information he didn't write. It's easy to say, 'he plagiarized,' but that doesn't capture every relevant description. His decision to 'including *those* words and *those*

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[18] A 'redeeming quality' as some of my more pious friends say.

sentences' was much more nuanced. He was doing research and found some good sources. He copied the phrasing from sources into a separate document. Eventually he decided he would add the original phrasing into his own paper, as placeholders. He intended to think hard about ideas and write them over in his own words, properly citing those sources. As time ran down, he left the originals in his paper. It was deliberate, but he 'hoped to God' no one would notice. He recognized the chance he was taking; he knew it was a risk and that it was dishonest. Leaving what he had was the most efficient way to complete a quality project in the time allotted. In his mind, he wasn't 'submitting plagiarized material' *in order to* 'complete the essay' any more than he was 'acting dishonestly' *in order to* 'complete the essay.' In his mind, while recognizing the characterization of dishonesty, that wasn't part of his plan—that wasn't *why* he plagiarized.[19] Students can become hyper-focused on certain tasks. They lose sight of the bigger picture, as we know all too well. Our conversation was considerably more detailed than this, but these are some highlights. It was important to see that he didn't just make a bad choice. He simply favored one virtue over another. We don't want our students to grow up thinking that tough decisions are a betting game built around the likelihood of getting caught. (Spending a day with a child will no doubt convince you that this is indeed how many of them make their calculations.) We want to point out that if they constantly favor the virtue of instrumental reasoning (or 'cleverness', as Gavin Lawrence called it), then that is the character they have built for themselves.

With plagiarism, the consequence is dishonesty, and it should be treated as such. I've seen students argue with teachers and administrators over the idea of plagiarism—how it's not that big of a deal because there's such fine lines between originality and borrowing material. Disagreements between students and teachers can often feel like a battle for ethical truth. Both sides dig-in even when the problem is clear. It can feel like an enormous epistemological gap between the two sides. The teacher thinks the students is delusional and wonders how the student could possibly defend himself? Variations on this disagreement occur more frequent than we'd like. The two sides are not that far apart, however, and so much can be gained if we focus on getting to the bottom of what happened.

I will briefly discuss one more anecdote. This term, while investigating a behavioral incident, I asked a student to provide information about another student. He told me, 'I'm not a snitch.' The idea of 'snitching' or 'telling on someone' has a long, sordid, and interesting history. Yet, there are a lot of teachers who become irate at students who play the 'no snitching' card. What's interesting is that the idea of snitch is inherently negative: it's a negative form of telling the truth (we often call it 'tattling'). What counts as snitching, and isn't just a moment of cooperation or honesty, is context-dependent. It usually arises in communities who are distrustful of law enforcement. Many inner-city cultures in the U.S. have variations of 'no snitching' practices. Police investigations are frustrated, and they can't understand why community members refused to help. Communities are not without justice and policing, but they avoid relying on government's version of it. Schools can develop a similar distrust of the administration and see themselves as at odds with the disciplinary system. Students won't snitch because they don't trust the system—the system which aims to help them. Is snitching a moment of honesty? It depends on whom you ask and in what community you reside. Would you snitch to the Nazi? Clearly withholding the truth isn't always the right play. We can call it 'dishonest' or 'not forthright', sure. But simply because someone chooses to act this way doesn't mean he or she lacks a valid understanding of the good one gets from staying quiet. It might be protection or salvation, both of

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[19] I mean to make this analogous to "Killing the bird's offspring" is not part of the firewood or a birdhouse making

which are legitimate virtues. As a school, finding 'no snitching' attitudes running around the halls should be cause for concern. Somehow the school's ethos has been lost on the students. And an important step in winning it back is to understand that the choices students make are complex pursuits of the good; they are going after some kind of virtue, and it's critical that we identify it.

Returning to the original question, 'Can we teach ethics in schools?' Yes, we can, and it's profitable. If we expect to raise good kids and help foster them into adulthood, we ought to focus on building virtue. Even without establishing metaethical truths, stipulating virtue as the basis for normativity will allow all of us to think clearly about how we make decisions and use normative language. We focus less on correct and incorrect decisions and more on how our decisions aim at specific goods, and how those aims influence our dispositions. If we want to argue about anything, let us discuss the profitability of each disposition. But, let us agree that there are various goods in every pursuit and that virtue characterizes those goods.