



THE  
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Insight Series

## The Accidental Virtue Scholar

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## The Accidental Virtue Scholar

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I began my training as a psychologist perfectly innocently, intending to become a psychology professor who would teach and conduct research in the usual way. To my great good fortune, I was selected to study Counseling Psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, and Frank Richardson taught me to question the unacknowledged assumptions of psychological research, theory, and practice. Frank had been studying ontological hermeneutics for some time, and this perspective revealed a powerful, culturally inspired set of assumptions underlying psychology as a discipline. Although I had no idea that I would learn hermeneutics at Texas, I was completely captivated by it. That is how I became a theoretical psychologist, someone who is interested in metatheory in psychology and whose work is located at the intersection of philosophy and psychology.

As we delved into the critiques that hermeneutics makes possible, we identified two central disciplinary value commitments, which we have termed individualism (the idea that the separate individual is the fundamental reality for humans) and instrumentalism (the idea that all human action has a means-end structure). We found these value commitments to be pervasive in psychology. The valuing of individual autonomy and dignity and of strategic action belie the fact-value separation that is an article of faith in psychological science.

So far, so good. Frank and I pursued this critique for many years. As you can imagine, this criticism of core, unacknowledged values made us enormously famous and popular in psychological circles. But the opposition to our critique was not our biggest problem. The most difficult aspect of this scholarship was that we had no real alternatives to individualism and instrumentalism. We would mumble something about new directions in the conclusions of our articles and books, but we did not have any clear alternatives.

One thread of my scholarship at this time included work on individualism and instrumentalism in psychological approaches to contemporary American marriage. I argued that communication skills, a central staple of psychological theory, research, and practice, embodied individualism (because their purpose is to serve individual needs and produce individual satisfaction) and instrumentalism (because skills are strategies that can serve good or bad ends). I suggested that the consequence of this state of affairs was that psychologists were contributing to the contemporary instability of marriage rather than ameliorating it. Still, I had no real alternatives.

At this time, I happened to have a somewhat random thought that communication skills could be thought of as proto-virtues. This idea intrigued me, so I wrote a little paper, published in 2001, entitled "The Limits of a Technical Concept of a Good Marriage." I thought it would be a one-off discussion of how communication skills could be re-described in virtue terms in a more enlightening way. As part of this writing project, I began to read in the virtue ethics literature.

Much to my surprise, I was once again captivated by philosophy. I kept reading, including books by Alasdair MacIntyre, Nancy Sherman, Rosalind Hursthouse, Amelie Rorty, and Sarah

Broadie. Inevitably, I began reading Aristotle. I discovered many things in this reading. First, I had not realized that hermeneutic philosophy is largely a neo-Aristotelian endeavor. Second, there was a vibrant philosophical literature on virtue that was deeply relevant to psychology and to ordinary life. Who knew? Certainly very few psychologists knew anything about virtue at that time. Third, in the first paragraph of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle provided the alternative necessary for instrumentalism, and in the combination of the *NE* and *The Politics*, he showed that individualism is not only misguided, but also provided an alternative. Finally, the key to these alternatives was the most important discovery: That virtues are human excellences that make it possible for us to live well as the kind of creatures we are. These insights were career- and life-changing for me.

I learned from Aristotle that “Every art or applied science and every systematic investigation, and similarly every action and choice, seem to aim at some good” (1094a 1-3). This is something I had always known implicitly, but his explicit statement in the first line of the *NE* changed everything for me as a psychologist. From his perspective, psychological science is aimed at “some good.” Most obviously, the good of science is knowledge, but psychological scientists are also deeply interested in autonomy, self-efficacy, personal satisfaction, individual dignity, and so forth. Aristotle calls on us to own up to those commitments, and psychologists generally and stringently resist such self-responsibility. If psychological science is devoted to human goods, and I have spent 15 years arguing that it is so devoted, then the venerated split between facts and values is a sham. Moreover, according to Aristotle, a science devoted to human goods must also require certain moral virtues for its proper enactment. Clearly, honesty is central, but so are patience, open-mindedness, proper ambition, practical wisdom, among other virtues. It is not hard to imagine a character ideal for scientists, and it is easy to see how deeply wrong things go when scientists are not honest, cut corners, or are close-minded or excessively ambitious.

Of course, Aristotle’s ethics has far greater scope than psychology. The central premise of his ethics is that human morality is co-extensive with human life because we are always pursuing what we see as worthwhile ends. Of course, we can have misguided perceptions of what is good or of how to pursue a genuine good, but our understanding of the good still guides us. The highest good is eudaimonia or human flourishing, which is constituted by rich, ongoing engagement in a variety of characteristically human goods such as friendship, knowledge, and justice. I have come to see these goods as characteristic ends for human beings, and successful pursuit of human goods as constituting human flourishing. It is obvious that we humans fare better when we participate in close attachments, experience belonging, participate in just relations, are esteemed by others, pursue and share knowledge, see our lives as meaningful, and so forth. What I like best about Aristotle’s ethics is that ethics us about being drawn toward what is good because we see that it is good rather than ethics built on rules and imperatives that compel us to act accordingly.

So how did Aristotle help me to identify alternatives to individualism and instrumentalism? He clarified that only some human activity is instrumental in the first paragraph of the *NE*: “in some cases the activity is the end, in others the end is some product beyond the activity. In cases where the end lies beyond the action the product is naturally superior to the activity” (1094a 3-6). That is, instrumental activity is where the product is important and the means are secondary. He identified what I call constitutive activity as those activities that

constitute the ends we are seeking. Friendship is one such activity. In the best kinds of friendship, we spend time with, help, and enjoy our friends because that is what it means to be friends, not because we are seeking some product or outcome. Other important constitutive activities include democracy, justice, belonging, and social harmony. In constitutive activities, the way we pursue the goal partly constitutes the goal. Aristotle's ethics clarifies that only some activities are instrumental. If one attempts to construe all activities as instrumental, it will distort and degrade those that are rightly seen as constitutive.

Aristotle also clarified that "man is by nature a social and political being" (1097b 7-11). He amplified this point in *The Politics* by claiming that "the *polis* (community) is by nature clearly prior to the family and to the individual" because "the individual, when isolated, is not self-sufficing" (1253a 19-26). With this startling reversal of our usual, individualistic understanding of the relationship between individuals and communities, Aristotle pushes us to recognize how dependent we are on our social milieu. In particular, he clarifies that some human activities can be pursued and achieved as individuals and others can only be pursued and achieved communally. This gives rise to a distinction between individual and shared goods, respectively. Individual activities are familiar to us, but shared activities are often opaque. Friendship is a paradigmatic shared activity because the only way to have a friendship is with another person; the friendship is something you share and cannot have solely as individuals. Other shared activities include justice, social order, and social cohesion. If we try to see such shared activities as just individuals seeking their own goals, we distort shared activities and lose much of their richness.

The Aristotelian conceptual resources that I have described are just the beginning of the riches I have found in his thought. I hope I have given an inkling of just how captivating and powerful his ethics is. I have found that his thought offers vital insights into contemporary dilemmas and confusions. The focus on character education at the Jubilee Centre is an enormously important application of Aristotelian ethics. I also find the concepts of virtue and eudaimonia incredibly valuable in making decisions in my personal and professional life. I would never claim to be ideally virtuous or to have achieved a eudaimonic life, but these concepts guide my thinking and action, helping me to be a better person than I would otherwise be.



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