‘I can’t forget it even if I try’: graduate attributes, student receptivity to virtues-talk and some implications for university policy and strategy

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Abstract

Despite the resurgence of ‘virtue ethics’ in recent years, doubts are sometimes expressed about the appropriateness of virtues-talk in contemporary pedagogical discourse. The fear seems to be that ‘virtue’ is a term now typically associated with prissiness or prudishness, and thereby likely to be dismissed by contemporary students. This paper reports on the experience of a funded project associated with ‘Virtues, Vices and Ethics’ - a final-year module at one UK university - in which we discovered quite the opposite. Discussion of virtues pushed at an open door. *Graduates of Character*[1] reports how widespread is the rather alarming idea that higher education does nothing to influence values. Yet our students showed great willingness to use the language of virtues to rethink important aspects of their lives and plans, from career choices to helping friends to cope with personal tragedy. Our project started off as one with a fairly narrow pedagogical focus: to assess whether and to what extent reflection on virtues such as gratitude, humility, pride, hope, patience, forgivingness and trust influenced students’ abilities to work in groups. But the results suggest that encouraging students to think in some detail about such virtues can have a far more profound impact, relevant way beyond the seminar room. The paper closes by suggesting that universities should be more explicit in making connections between virtues of character and graduate attributes. It also suggests that universities can use the language of character and virtue more robustly to demonstrate the value of the humanities for the employability agenda.

[1] James Arthur et al, *Graduates of Character. Values and Character: Higher Education and Employment*, 2009.

1. Introduction: 'graduate attributes', character and the virtues

The language of 'graduate attributes' now pervades many universities, both in the UK and overseas. Sometimes such attributes are cashed out in terms of 'skills'. But dig beneath the often one-dimensional skills-talk that has tended to dominate much learning and teaching discourse, and one finds that much of what are valued as 'graduate attributes' are in fact a cluster of key ethical and intellectual virtues. Successful team-working, for instance, is a complex phenomenon that typically requires patience and trust. In many circumstances, it also requires a subtle blend of pride (in our work) and humility (recognition of what we owe to others and of the defeasibility of our own judgements). To say nothing of gratitude, hopefulness, justice, courage and – sometimes – the capacity for forgiveness.

This paper aims to provide one kind of support for the view that universities can afford to be more robust in making a link between virtues of character and graduate attributes. Consider the following recently expressed worry:

> 'Today's university students will be tomorrow's doctors, engineers, business managers, teachers, faith leaders, politicians, citizens, activists, parents and neighbours. While they need to be able to demonstrate key skills and knowledge to enact these roles effectively, they must also demonstrate good character in carrying out these responsibilities ... In recent history, [however] ... moral and social aims of higher education have been overshadowed by emphases on instrumental and economic goals, including employability skills and preparation for the workplace.'[2]

[2] Kathleen M. Quinlan, 'Developing the whole student: leading higher education initiatives that integrate mind and heart', Leadership Foundation for Higher Education stimulus paper, 2011, p. 5. Of course, this kind of worry is nothing new. As long ago as Aristotle, we find similar anxieties about the purpose of higher education: 'in modern times ... there are no

But what if 'employability skills and preparation for the workplace' might actually be *enhanced* by putting more of a focus on character and virtues?

2. Virtues, student group work and beyond: a project

Last year, my colleague Sylvie Magerstädt and I designed and taught a final year undergraduate Philosophy module, 'Virtues, Vices and Ethics'. Alongside this, motivated by the ideas in the above section, we ran a project funded by our university's Learning and Teaching Institute which consisted of focus group interviews asking whether reflection on the virtues had aided students' collaborative working abilities.[3] Our focus was initially concerned with improving student group-work in the context of the above concerns about employability. But – as we shall explain below - the students reported that the module had a more profound impact on their wider lives and ways of thinking than we had anticipated.

Although we discussed the virtues against an Aristotelian background, the module eschewed more standard approaches to 'virtue ethics' in Philosophy curricula by focusing primarily on a body of recent philosophical writing on the grammar of such putative 'personal virtues' as gratitude, humility, pride, hope, patience, forgivingness and trust. We adopted Robert C.

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generally accepted assumptions about what the young should learn, either for virtue or for the best life; nor yet is it clear whether their education ought to be conducted with more concern for the intellect than for the character of the soul. The problem has been complicated by the education that we see actually given; and it is by no means certain whether training should be directed at things useful in life, or at those conducive to virtue or at exceptional accomplishments. (All these answers have been judged correct by somebody.)' (Aristotle, *Politics*, VIII ii 1337a33)

[3] This grew out of an earlier project, funded by the Higher Education Academy, on academic friendships (see Brendan Larvor, John Lippitt and Kathryn Weston, 'Critical friendships among beginning philosophers', *Discourse* vol. 10-2 (2011) pp. 111-146). Here we wanted to know: What makes a good 'academic friend'? What qualities do students need most effectively to help each other with their academic work? Virtue terms – such as trust, patience, maturity and honesty – emerged quickly and naturally from these discussions. On a more theoretical level, some of the material in these projects was developed from my recent work on specific virtues such as hope, trust and forgivingness in the context of self-respect and 'proper self-love'. This is discussed in more detail in John Lippitt, *Kierkegaard and the Problem of Self-Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Roberts' view that '[t]he way to study virtue [in general] is to study the virtues [in their concrete particularity], and to do so rather in depth'.[4] Thus we spent the bulk of the time investigating features of specific individual virtues (and their interrelations), focusing on questions such as: What is it? What's good about it? How does it benefit its possessor and those around him/her? We deliberately did not explicitly focus on the four cardinal virtues, though in the event, they came up regularly in student discussions in connection with other virtues. (This was true especially of courage.)

As the module was partly assessed by group presentations, we ran two sets of focus groups alongside it. The first sought to solicit student views of the pros and cons of assessed group work, while the second aimed to gauge whether and to what extent reflection on the virtues addressed in the module had aided their ability to work collaboratively or had made an impact beyond the seminar room.[5] Our desire to get students working in groups was rooted in the view (recently articulated by Hugh Sockett amongst others) that higher education would be better served by a greater focus on cooperation rather than (just) competitiveness in learning.[6] Part of our aim was to offer an experience opposed to the entirely individualistic assumptions about higher education expressed by a recent graduate:

> 'At university everything you did was for yourself. If I didn't do something then I would fail. If I don't do something here [in my job] it just doesn't relate to me it

[4] Robert C. Roberts, *Emotions: an essay in aid of moral psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 3.
[5] The first focus groups were with students who had taken at least one Philosophy or Media Studies module that had been part assessed by group presentation. The second groups were with students all of whom had taken the module 'Virtues, Vices and Ethics'.
[6] Hugh Sockett, *Knowledge and virtue in teaching and learning: the primacy of dispositions* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 69. See also his comments about the desired result of the classroom with an 'epistemological presence' at pp. 105-6. In saying this, we are certainly not claiming that it is desirable to rid higher education of all competitive elements, not least for the reasons discussed in Larvor, Lippitt and Weston above. See especially p. 139.

relates to everyone in the team around me. You're responsible and accountable to other people, not just yourself.'[7]

In the first set of focus groups, the general attitude towards assessed group work was more positive than anticipated. Most students seemed to understand its relevance and purpose, and to value the focus on teamwork and collaboration rather than just individualistic competition. Comments in favour of group work included that it helps to 'make contacts' and 'get different points of view', and appreciation of the fact that such work involves learning from other people in the group (rather than just lecturers and texts). Working in groups forces you to be better organised. It involves being unselfish, learning to compromise and developing tolerance and diplomacy (as one student put it, 'I learned to communicate my opinion *politely*'). Other character traits mentioned included open-mindedness and learning to empathise with others' problems. One factor relevant to the workplace was that in a student group, like one's place of employment, one would not be friends with one's colleagues 'straight away'. (If ever, one might add.)[8] However, the individualistic assumptions mentioned above were manifested, perhaps understandably, in the general concern about one's grades being 'pulled down' by the inadequate contributions of others. (Ironically, the possibility of scenarios equivalent to *this* in the workplace was never mentioned by students.)

In the second focus group, we asked the following questions:

1. What experience have you had with group work prior to this module? What problems have you encountered, if any?

[7] Cited in Arthur et al 2009: 91.
[8] Students also commented upon the value of the experience of *giving* presentations. Having to think on one's feet (such as in question and answer sessions) could be stressful, but helped to build confidence.

2. To what extent have these problems been rooted in the character of either yourself or those you've been working with?

3. To what extent have either these problems - or things that have gone well in group work - been rooted specifically in the vices and virtues of yourself / your fellow group members?

4. What would you list as the top three desirable personal virtues for group work?

5. What would you list as the three worst personal vices for group work?

6. Has your study of the virtues in this module impacted on your life outside the classroom? How?

7. Thinking specifically of preparation for your group presentations, has your study of the virtues impacted upon your ability to work collaboratively? How? If not, why not?

8. In reflecting on virtues and vices, we all tend to recognise something about the strengths and weaknesses of our own character. How might developing your own personal virtues help with your

   – collaborative academic work

   – future careers

   – life in general?

In what follows, we shall focus on the answers to questions 6 to 8. Amongst the responses elicited to question 6 were the following:

'It's made me aware of my own character.'

'It's nice that you can relate it to everyday life.'

‘It showed why philosophy is relevant. I don’t think this takes away from its academic merit.’

‘Thinking about virtues and vices helps me better understand other people and their actions. I’ve had to become more empathetic.’

‘It helps develop social skills.’

‘It’s empowered me. I’m a changed man!’

‘I can - and do - now talk about virtues with my family and friends’.

‘Is pride a virtue? It’s still an on-going discussion with my friends … Forgiveness and pride we talk about a lot.’

(One student reported overhearing a conversation between two women who were arguing about whether or not one should forgive her boyfriend for a transgression. He claimed having actively had to prevent himself from stepping in to provide an analysis of kinds of forgiveness that he thought might have been helpful!)

With regard to our original interest in the possible relevance of the virtues to collaborative group work (question 7), the results were modest. In general, students had not found an immediate, obvious impact on the way they worked with each other. However, some thought there was indeed a correlation between studying virtues and improved collaborative working. One commented, to supportive nods from his peers, that ‘I wouldn’t say we were thinking about the virtues in this way while we were doing it [preparing for the group presentation]. It’s only now on reflection that I can see that the virtues were in play’. One group generated an interesting side discussion about whether the module came at the right time in their university careers. Someone expressed the view that the module, being ‘different’ and ‘more easy to appropriate’ than many philosophy modules, should be in the second year. But others

strongly disagreed, arguing that there was a 'type of intellectual maturity needed before you can really benefit from it', and that the final semester of undergraduate study was indeed the optimal time. The reason given was that this is precisely when one wants to study a kind of philosophy that has an obvious relevance to life beyond the classroom – since one's immediate future involves trying to enter the world of post-graduation work. Several students expressed confidence that cultivating virtues would aid their employability.

By and large, students thought that the effects of the module were more likely to be long-term. One student who reported that the module had had no discernible effect on group work said that it had nevertheless 'changed me in other ways. I notice things I didn't before.' Relatedly, many of the comments we found most interesting were in response to question 8. Admittedly, some stayed at a fairly superficial level. One commented that the module 'has helped me with my interview skills: I can now list my virtues!' (We wondered if this student had *quite* got the hang of humility.) But others reported having engaged in a significant degree of self-reflection. One said that reflection on virtues and vices had 'changed my perception of things – I know the importance of something that I didn't know before'. She went on to describe her previous tendency towards control-freakery in group work: doing others' work for them in case they messed up to the detriment of the group's overall mark. She concluded that, in hindsight, maybe the problem had been that 'I didn't trust people enough.' Another student claimed that the content of the module had really got under her skin: 'It helps you understand what sort of person you want to be. I can't forget it, even if I try ... Each week, I asked myself: "What would my life be like if I had more pride, self-respect, patience, or whatever...?"' The same student also reported a direct effect on her behaviour: 'I was in a situation where I could have lied easily, but now didn't want to lie because I didn't want to be a dishonest person.'

One of the findings of *Graduates of Character* that we found most alarming was the widespread idea that higher education does nothing to influence values.[9] In contrast, some students in our focus groups reported significant alterations in some aspect of their lives. These ranged from a radical change in career plans to recognition of the importance of the virtues in helping friends deal with personal tragedy. In the former case, one student said that reflection on virtues and vices had 'helped me analyse myself a little more'. Ever since before university, she had always wanted to go into publishing, but 'I realised that what would be considered virtues in that career are not what I value'. Consequently she was now planning to go into teaching. We found the second student's experience genuinely moving:

> 'When my friend was recently diagnosed with cancer, reflecting on virtues helped me to handle what's going on. It made me reflect on my own virtues and vices. I realised that I had to be more patient and to develop hope and forgivingness.'

Similarly, another student reported enhanced tolerance: thinking about virtues and vices 'softens your judgements on certain people. You realise they're lacking this and that…'

A further student drew some interesting conclusions about pedagogy:

> 'I'd advise everyone to develop their virtues – academic staff as well as students. ... Staff and students need to have the *courage* to meet at the same level.'[10]

[9] See James Arthur, *Of Good Character: Exploration of Virtues and Values in 3-25 Year-Olds* (Imprint Academic, 2010), p. 73. None of the top ten 'qualities [participating students and graduates thought that] HE considers important' (ibid.: 74) in the *Graduates of Character* report have much to do with moral character. (Being 'hard-working' is probably the one that comes closest.) In the full report, one has to get a long way down the list before one encounters 'humility' and 'striving to be the best' (arguably a form of pride). See *Graduates of Character*, p. 135.

[10] A version of this idea – the importance of parity of emotional risk between students and staff – also came up in our earlier research. See Brendan Larvor and John Lippitt, 'Wot u @ uni 4? Expectations and actuality of studying philosophy at university', *Discourse*, vol. 9-1, pp. 93-109 at 102.

In short, the concerns of the module seemed to have impacted on a significant number of students well beyond the collaborative group work and to have influenced them much more broadly.

3. Graduate attributes

In line with the earlier point about the possible relevance of virtues of character to employability, it is worth noting that some students reckoned that talk of virtues might be a more direct way of getting at what is valued in 'graduate attributes'. In line with Quinlan's warning - that talk of graduate attributes must be careful not to 'reduce students to ... packaged products with a set of specifications'[11] - one student commented that 'Talk about graduate attributes can be too dogmatic ... Cultivate the virtues and you get them straight away'. Indeed, key aspects of our own university's 'graduate attributes' might profitably be cashed out in virtue terms. Consider the following:

> 'Our graduates will be confident, act with integrity, *set themselves high standards* and have skills that are essential to their future lives'.[12]

The focus here on setting oneself high standards is another way of describing a virtuous kind of pride, and also implicitly involves a variety of courage. Consider also:

- '**Respect for others:** The University promotes self-awareness, empathy, cultural awareness and mutual respect. Our graduates will have respect for themselves and others and will be courteous, inclusive and able to work in a wide range of cultural settings.'

- **'Social responsibility:** The University promotes the values of ethical behaviour, sustainability and personal contribution. Our graduates will understand how their

[11] Quinlan 2011: 7.
[12] http://www.herts.ac.uk/about-us/student-charter/graduate-attributes.cfm, my emphasis.

actions can enhance the wellbeing of others and will be equipped to make a valuable contribution to society.'

These *desiderata* could be usefully unpacked by explicit reference to virtues such as patience, humility, gratitude, justice, compassion and hope – all operating under the overall banner of 'practical wisdom'. It is for this reason that, in response to a presentation on this project, Hertfordshire's Pro Vice-Chancellor for Student Experience commented on the importance of virtues-talk for his brief, adding: 'We need to rediscover a lost vocabulary'.[13] If this is on the mark, then two interesting questions for universities are how we have allowed such a vocabulary to be 'lost', and what needs to be done to rediscover it.

4. Conclusion and implications

James Arthur has claimed that in most universities, a schism exists between teaching, research and scholarship on the one hand, and character formation on the other, 'as academic activity is increasingly viewed independently of behaviour as a citizen'.[14] The results of our focus groups suggest that students might actively welcome these barriers being broken down. We believe there is much scope for valuable work in considering how such work on the virtues as discussed here might be applied in disciplines other than philosophy, both within and beyond the arts and humanities. According to *Graduates of Character*, few university courses explicitly encourage students to think about character and ethics: few have an explicit ethical dimension, unless it is 'in some way intrinsic to the course, for example in theology, philosophy, psychology or the study of literature'.[15] And where ethical issues did arise in

[13] Compare here the fact that in *Graduates of Character*, 'Traditional virtues such as courage, justice, temperance, wisdom were mentioned comparatively rarely, though they could be said to underpin many of the perspectives offered.' (p. 7).
[14] Arthur 2010: 76; cf. James Arthur with Karen E. Bohlin, *Citizenship and Higher Education: the role of universities in communities and society* (Abingdon: Routledge Falmer, 2005).
[15] *Graduates of Character*, p. 83.

professional programmes, 'there was some doubt about [their] relation to personal values and ethics because the focus was more on compliance than building the character of the person involved'.[16] Yet crucially, the same report stresses how employers 'point to the missing dimension of personal "character" as often as they express concerns about lack of skills and knowledge in new employees'.[17] This shows something of the value – for what employers say that they want – of humanities subjects traditionally considered to be non-vocational. Perhaps, then, universities can afford to draw more explicitly on the language of character and virtue to demonstrate the value of disciplines such as philosophy, theology and literature to the employability agenda.

Yet perhaps it also matters hugely *how* this material is taught. If ethics is taught on a purely theoretical level, or if it never gets beyond 'trolley problem' thought-experiments and the like, there is much less likelihood of students linking its concepts to their own lives and characters with any real depth of vision.[18] The approach we encouraged in students – which included the requirement, in written coursework, to reflect on their own personal experience as well as relevant philosophical literature – provides an alternative possibility to university ethics teaching that may warrant wider application.[19]

[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid., p. 10.
[18] One focus group student commented that the virtues module had 'given a more practical starting point than other forms of ethics'.
[19] We would like to express our gratitude to the University of Hertfordshire's Learning and Teaching Institute for the grant during 2011/12 that made this research possible.