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## **Can Virtue Be Measured?**

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### **Can Virtue be Measured? <sup>1</sup>**

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This question naturally arises in the context of character education if one thinks that character consists in, or is closely related to the possession of virtues and vices and one is also interested in the possibility that education may inculcate or develop the former and inhibit or diminish the latter.

Scepticism in this area might take the form of doubting that virtue and vice can be measured, because let us say they are real but intangible characteristics, or more radically of doubting that there are any such things at all. The latter suspicion might arise from encountering recurrent difficulties in developing methods for measuring the presence of a virtue, or be prompted by the repeated failure of psychological measurement to detect any relevant candidate feature, or be encouraged by the success of psychological methods success in fully identifying patterns of action, and changes in these, without reference to anything like virtue.

Here I shall approach these issues philosophically from the point of view of a traditional conception of virtue and consider its place in the explanation and evaluation of action. This will provide reasons to think that while in some respects virtue may be measured this is liable to be a complex matter.

Additionally I will suggest that to the extent that it can be done it is in any case insufficient to determine the broader moral competence of an agent because virtue is only

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part of the story. Morality also involves considerations external to agents' motivations, such as issues of welfare and autonomy and measuring understanding and responsiveness to the demands of these is a yet more complex issue.

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A virtue, classically understood, is an active capacity or power relating to certain ranges of features or situations. Active powers are defined by their exercises, which in turn are defined by their proper objects. To understand this consider an analogous point about a perceptual capacity: that of sight, say. The power of sight is defined by reference to its exercises or operations, and these are identified by their proper objects. Light is the medium of sight but its objects are colours and shapes. So sight is the power to discern these specific sensibles.

Non-rational beings evidently have sensory and other active powers, and non-sentient beings also have capacities to act and react, but so far as the last of these is concerned these capacities are uni-directional: that is to say they can only be exercised in one way. If an acid is placed on blue litmus paper, and there are no countervailing powers at work, it turns it red; if a flame is applied to dry paper, and again no impeding factor is operating, it ignites it.

A person possessed of a virtue has a capacity to act in a certain way with respect to the object of that capacity. Consider courage, and let us say that its proper objects are threats and dangers. The courageous agent has a power to act appropriately with regard to these. But what is appropriate action? Is it to engage the threat or confront the danger? Is a person not courageous - either simply lacking it or being positively cowardly - if they choose to evade the threat or escape the danger?

To get clearer about this I think we need to distinguish two aspects of a virtue, or two kinds of constitutive capacities in the general power that is the virtue. First, its *recognitional* aspect, i.e. the capacity to identify an object as being of the relevant sort – this is analogous to

the capacity of sight being defined in relation to colours and shapes. Second, however, there is its *responsive* aspect. In the case of the acid or the flame we might say figuratively that each '*recognises*' the presence of the litmus or of the dry paper and then *responds*, but this is misleading not only because there is no cognition but because to the extent that one may speak of 'detection' and 'response' they are really the same thing and their operation is one way. Acids neutralize, flames burn. There is no question of them not responding or of responding differently, which is why talk of 'response' is misplaced.

In the case of the courageous person, however, there is a real difference between detecting danger and responding to it. I don't mean there is a temporal gap, there may or may not be; rather the point is a logical one. The reason to say this is that the coward may share the same recognitional capacity, where they differ is in their response: in what they feel, or fail to fail, and in what they do, or fail to do. Some philosophers will deny this, saying that the recognitional capacities are different, but then they face the problem of equivocation in saying that the courageous and the cowardly respond differently to perceived danger. If there is no equivocation here, as I believe there is not, then the assumption of difference in objects of recognition is false, though of course the same object may be differently coloured but (in Frege's terminology) that is not a matter of 'sense' [*sinn*] but of 'associated idea' [*Vorstellung*].

I asked rhetorically whether a courageous person might not choose to evade a threat; and if that is exactly what the coward may be expected to do how can we tell them apart? One answer is by asking what it is the agent takes themselves to be doing. But there are difficulties with this since a person may lack self-knowledge, or be self-deceived, or simply be inarticulate.

We can make some progress, however, by posing certain counterfactuals: asking what the agent would have done had other features been different. How, though, are we to frame

these counterfactuals? what is to be held constant and what varied? The general answer is surely clear enough: we vary the scenarios so as to try to elicit or determine what a suitably situated courageous person would do. But then this looks as if we have to have at least the same recognitional and responsive capacities. This is right, or at least we have to have some reasonable imaginative grip on these, and in particular we need to have a conception of the object of the recognitional capacity as being good or bad, and of the response object, what the agent would aim at, as being good.

So the first conclusion is that any effort to measure virtue (or vice) cannot proceed by simply observing behavior, including what is said. This has to be interpreted in light of a conception of good and bad. Here someone might say that one doesn't have to share that conception, it could simply be a matter of looking at conventional norms and standards. But then one could not claim to draw any conclusions about *virtue* as such and about the capacity of education to induce or develop *it*.

Nothing so far says that virtue is immeasurable, only that any attempt to measure it means sharing in the evaluative business of recognition and response and this means that any measurement has qualitative presuppositions and cannot be a purely quantitative exercise, as might be the case in determining how quickly someone recognized and responded to the presence of coloured shapes on a screen.

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Implicit in what I have said so far, however, is something that puts the prospect of establishing extensive and systematic measurements in question, and this is the holistic character of virtues. The recognition of a situation as dangerous, say, is already a relativised evaluation. Nothing is dangerous *per se*. Some aspect of a situation is dangerous in a respect and to a degree in relation to a range of subjects. Likewise, the response to danger has to

factor that evaluation into a broader judgement about whether confronting the danger is worth it. A courageous person is not just fearless, rather they are prepared to face down a threat in the interest of some good and whether we judge their repose virtuous more broadly will depend on the evaluation of this other good - an evaluation we need to enter into. It will be no use just saying 'well it mattered greatly to her and she was prepared to risk danger for the sake of it' since for one thing 'being prepared to risk danger' may be the mark of a reckless person; and for another if we think the good in question is one that any sensible person would judge trivial or no good at all then we might be reluctant to call the disposition 'courage'; and even if we did we would not want to say that the behavior was virtuous all things considered since part of what needs to be considered is whether it was prudent.

Here I am not insisting upon the so-called 'unity of the virtues' – that you only have one if you have all, which quickly turns into the dubious thesis that there is really only one virtue: VIRTUE; but only that no power of recognition and response is a virtue unless it is ordered in specific situations towards such good as should be aimed at in these circumstances, and if there are several possible goods then to the best of these if there is one. And it cannot be so ordered unless it is under the direction of prudence or practical wisdom.

So what kind of measurement of virtue could be feasible? First, one would need to fashion a way of determining what would count as a virtue being present in someone. That has certain formal conditions. The subject has to have

- 1) a *conception* (not necessarily verbalized) of a feature or state of affairs as having a positive or negative valency;
- 2) a *disposition* to protect or promote some good that is liable to be affected by that valency, and
- 3) an *ability* to situate this conception and that disposition within a deliberative framework that has as its object some good.

Whether satisfying these conditions actually amounts to possession of virtue will depend on how this formal framework is completed in respect of its evaluative elements. Recall that a coward may recognize that a situation poses a threat, be disposed to protect his own skin, and be able, in virtue of having a broader end in view to conclude that he should run away. This conclusion is not guaranteed by the disposition since the latter may only incline and not determine, and be defeated by another fear, say that of being branded a coward.

I do not think it is impossible to construct means of measuring virtue given what I have said about it, but I do think it cannot be either a value free, a behaviouristic, or a determinate business. Here it may be helpful to think of the analogous situation of determining whether someone has a specific artistic ability, let us call it 'colour virtue' by which I mean the capacity to make fine colour discriminations and the ability to respond to these by acting with regard to shades and hues, typically by arranging them in certain ways. (what in art criticism might be described as having a strong colour sensibility and palette). It is not impossible to say whether someone is better at this than another, or whether a process of aesthetic education might effect improvements in these respects. Art teachers do this kind of thing much of the time. It would be crazy, however, to think that there might be a general framework and set of quantitative tests by which it could be determined unambiguously that certain actions demonstrated improvement in this aesthetic virtue.

First, one's evaluations in this field would be those of a partial participant in the judgements one was trying to measure, and second that participant perspective would quickly reveal that what counts as virtue depends on other aesthetic factors, including what one would do in counter-factual situations and at later, possibly unrealized, stages which one imaginatively took into account in deciding to act in such and such a way. None of this, however, gives reason for doubting that there is such as thing as aesthetic virtue. On the

contrary the difficulties I have identified and discussed presuppose the reality of it. Returning to the prior and more familiar case and putting the matter somewhat paradoxically, one may say that encountering recurrent difficulties in developing methods for measuring its presence and extent may be good evidence for the reality of virtue.

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Finally, however, I suggested that virtue may be only one part of what is involved in moral competence so let me explain this by saying something, however brief, about the structure of moral thinking as I see it.

The most common form of moral decision-making in institutional contexts remains that of utilitarianism: looking to determine which of among the range of available courses in a given situation would produce the greatest utility (and factoring into the choice of action the relative probabilities of realizing the various outcomes). Beginning with Bentham and Mill utility was first identified with pleasure, then with happiness, and later by others with either preference satisfaction or welfare. There is an evident oscillation here between subjective and objective conditions explicable by a concern to avoid two problems: first, that mere pleasure or satisfaction are themselves open to evaluation as good or bad depending upon their objects; but, second that happiness and welfare are contested notions and seemingly immeasurable.

More to the point, however, is the thought that utilitarianism instrumentalises individuals by treating their state as simply a component of overall utility and warranting harm and destruction for the sake of the general good. In recognition of this it has become increasingly common to observe that even where the promotion of welfare is at issue there are constraints in its pursuit arising from requirements of justice and respect for rights. Mill had written “happiness is the only thing desirable, as an end, all other things being desirable



as means to that end”; but the fact is that we recognize, even where we choose to override other kinds of value, the desirability of which is not as means to happiness. In particular there is the idea that one should never treat others solely as means even for the sake of achieving a good. This idea of respect for persons lies behind the concern in various sectors for providing information and securing consent. But if utilitarianism is problematic in neglecting the integrity of the individual, the imperative of respect for others, understood as observing their autonomy, seems at risk of neglecting the demands of welfare and of failing to allow for the idea of legitimate paternalism.

An important lesson from the debates between advocates of these seemingly conflicting ethical outlooks is, I suggest, the need to recognize the inadequacy on one-dimensional moral thinking, both in respect of its deliverances on particular issues, but more importantly in its failure to recognize the plurality and incommensurability of kinds of moral considerations. Furthermore, in addition to there being considerations deriving from the desirability of attaining human goods, and others deriving from demands of justice and respect there are also considerations relating to motivation and character. Mill himself recognizes this writing that:

“It really is of importance, not only what men do, but also what manner of men they are that do it. ... desires and impulses are as much a part of a perfect human being, as beliefs and restraints” (*On Liberty*, Chapter II, 5.)

This third dimension of moral thinking corresponds, of course to the category, with I began, that of virtue. This is not simply acting in accord with the good (utility) or the right (duty) but with a certain quality of character. The logic of moral evaluation and deliberation is three dimensional; and there is a further feature which also indicates the need to bring

diverse considerations into play: namely that when thinking about the good, and here it will be sufficient to take the case of that human well-being, it is necessary to distinguish between *promoting* that good and *protecting* it.

Morality, and moral consciousness, involves considerations external to agents' motivations, such as issues of welfare and autonomy. Measuring a subject's understanding and responsiveness to the demands of these is a complex issue and since the relation between the three kinds of considerations is not simply additive but interactive the resulting complexity and variation renders the task of measuring moral competence all the more demanding, but that does not exclude as common practice confirms, the possibility of making evidenced-based comparative judgements; and surely that is enough for the purpose at hand. As Aristotle says in *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 3 ((1094b):

“...we will speak adequately if we make things clear to the extent to which the subject matter allows, for precision is not to be found in all discussions alike...we must be satisfied then in speaking of such subjects to indicate the truth roughly and in outline form”.

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