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JUBILEE CENTRE
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UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

**Is Measuring Virtue an Educationally Good Thing?
Or
Two Cheers for Measuring Virtue**

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These are unpublished conference papers for the 'Can Virtue Be Measured?', held by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Values at Oriel College, Thursday 9th – Saturday 11th January 2014. These papers are works in progress and should not be cited without author's prior permission.

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Is Measuring Virtue an Educationally Good Thing?
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There are clearly some good reasons to assess programs designed to enhance virtues. After all, such programs incur costs (in time, effort and money), and funders want reassurance that their funding is well spent; educators involved in the fostering of virtues want their efforts to be effective; and so on. In short: we want to know whether such programs work, not least so we can improve them. This is in keeping with more general reasons to engage in educational testing and measurement: to monitor student performance, measure teacher and/or school effectiveness, ensure accountability, and use this information to improve our efforts and results.

Nevertheless, there are also reasons to be cautious when it comes to the measurement of educational outcomes, and this is true concerning the measurement of virtue as well. These reasons include such well-known phenomena as ‘teaching to the test’, which diminishes educational efforts by focusing on the most easily measured to the exclusion of the more difficult-to-measure but nonetheless more educationally significant material; the minimizing of teacher autonomy by turning teachers into mindless deliverers of pre-digested curriculum material and mindless measurers of resulting student mastery of that material; and, in doing the latter, contributing to teacher demoralization and attrition. These are general worries about measurement and are not relevant only to assessing virtues.

Moreover, any attempt to measure educational outcomes must obey the Do No Harm principle: our efforts to measure such must do no harm. We must not assess in ways that frustrate the achievement of desired outcomes. This is true in particular of our efforts to measure the virtues: Such efforts to measure them must not negatively impact our efforts to foster the virtues (assuming that that is a legitimate aim of education) or any other legitimate educational aim.

In the case of measuring virtues there is a particular danger: that measuring virtue will have the effect of distracting both teachers and students from the acquisition of genuine virtue and focusing them instead on easier to measure indicators of virtues; i.e., behaviors that are situationally prompted and not measures of enduring traits of character. This danger is related to but distinct from the well known and increasingly influential ‘situationist critique of character’. The latter threatens the very idea of character, and so virtues: no one has any virtues because no one has any character traits; rather, what appear to be such traits are rather fleeting, situationally prompted responses to equally fleeting stimuli. The former ‘distracting’ worry does not deny the existence of character, character traits, or virtues; it rather concerns the predictable tendency of educators tasked with the measuring of virtues to instead measure student behaviors that may or may not be indicative of genuine virtues but are easier to measure than the genuine article.

All these problems with measuring virtues are significant. However, there is yet another problem, one that I will briefly develop here. I will argue that measuring virtues threatens the development of student *autonomy* because it presupposes a clear understanding of the virtues – their nature, substance and character – and in effect imposes this understanding on students. It says, in effect, ‘These are the character traits

and the understanding of them you should have; these are the virtues we have determined you should have, the acquisition of which we are measuring.’ It does (or at least need) not offer the presupposed understanding of the virtues, or the predetermined judgment of their worthiness, to students’ independent judgment; it does (or at least need) not provide the opportunity for students to consider for themselves whether the measured traits are indeed virtues, or whether they are worth having. By imposing a pre-digested understanding of the virtues on students, measuring virtue runs the risk of treating students as mere means rather than as ends-in-themselves. In doing so it risks treating students immorally, because it fails to treat them with respect, as autonomous agents whose desires, needs and interests ought not to be subordinated to educators’ (or funders’!) imposed ends. As Israel Scheffler has argued, education should not endeavor to shape the mind of the student or to prepare the student for pre-determined roles in the social and economic orders. It should rather strive to *liberate* the mind by enabling the student both to envision possibilities and to evaluate their desirability intelligently. (Scheffler 1989, pp. 143-4.) In the same way, education’s task should be not to shape students’ characters but rather to enable them to envision possible characters, traits and virtues and to evaluate their desirability critically. In attempting to shape student character and to measure virtues in the service of such shaping, we run the risk of violating the Do No Harm principle by harming student autonomy.

There is, in this worry, a tension between Aristotelian and Kantian approaches to morality, moral education and virtue theory; in pressing the worry I will explore this tension and suggest that we should be wary of presupposing too much of Aristotle’s virtue theory in either our understanding of or our efforts to measure virtue. In doing so

I'll be painting with a broad brush and arguably offering mere caricatures of these two approaches. I hope I can be forgiven for this, as my aim here is not to critique either of these venerable traditions but only to note the danger concerning the frustration of the development of autonomy that efforts to measure virtues risk.

Aristotle v. Kant

For Aristotle, *habits* and *habituation* are central to moral education. On his view, the aim of moral education is to produce moral students/persons by developing their character, habits/dispositions, and practical reason. On this view, the development of rational autonomy is not the central objective of moral education. Rather, the central objective is to produce students who are virtuous, as Aristotle understands this: just, temperate, courageous, etc. And this is to be done in the first instance by habituating students:

...but the virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g. men become builders by building and lyre players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts. (*NE* Book 2 Chapter 1)

Aristotle also thought that virtue requires *phronesis*: 'practical judgment' or 'practical wisdom'. Characterizing this is notoriously difficult. But if it's *good*, it must meet relevant epistemic criteria: the practical reasons thought to license particular

judgments (and actions) must actually support those judgments and actions. Is this epistemic dimension of judgment acknowledged by efforts to inculcate, teach or measure virtues? It is not clear to me that, or how, this epistemic requirement on the execution of the virtues can be met, or acknowledged, by efforts to measure virtue. This is, at any rate, a danger that we must guard against in our zeal to measure student virtue.

It would be unfair to say that Aristotle does not favor rational autonomy. But that ideal is much more Kantian in flavor. Kant thought that our fundamental moral duty to children/students is to treat them with *respect as persons*. This too is notoriously difficult to unpack. But on one plausible reading of it, championed by Scheffler (and me), treating students with respect as persons requires submitting what we teach to their independent judgment (thus acknowledging their autonomy), which makes sense only if they are competent reasoners and judges, which requires us to foster their rationality as well. That is, we must help them to become *critical thinkers*: able, willing and disposed to determine for themselves what to believe or do *well*, or at least competently, on the basis of reasons that support particular beliefs, judgments and actions.

There is a long story to tell about all this, of course. The important point here is that we should take this general point concerning respect and rationality to apply to the teaching and measuring of virtue. And this means that even if we must *start* by habituating students to do things that we (not they) have determined are virtuous, we mustn't *finish* this way. We shouldn't impose our beliefs concerning particular virtues or our theories of virtue on our students, but rather submit them to students' independent judgment.

This is a familiar point in some ed'l contexts. For example, we have long known that alleged virtues such as 'punctuality' have enormous political ramifications and are probably not genuine virtues at all. But even things we think are genuine virtues, like justice, mercy, caring, etc., should be submitted to students' independent judgment. This will be hard to do if we are measuring the virtuousness of students or the effectiveness of our efforts to make them virtuous. Students must be able to choose their own ends, including determining for themselves whether they should be virtuous and if so what that means. Can we enable them to do this while also measuring virtue?

In principle, we can. So the answer is Yes. But it's tricky. The analogous problem arises with respect to the fostering of rationality: We need to impart to students our understanding of the epistemic force of reasons before they are in a position to critically assess that understanding. How can we do this without violating their autonomy and imposing our own understanding on them? We do it by using *non-indoctrinating belief inculcation*: We teach what we think are correct principles of reason assessment, while insisting on our fallibility, remaining open to criticism and improvement, and striving to enable students to consider for themselves the worthiness of what we ask them to believe. (*Educating Reason*, ch. 5) We must do the same thing with virtues: e.g., we can work to develop their disposition to act justly while striving to enable students to consider for themselves the nature and desirability of justice.

If we can do this, the problem I'm raising can be managed. If not, we ought not to measure virtues. That, measuring virtues is morally acceptable only if it can be done in a way that does not frustrate the fostering of students' autonomy and rationality. And of course it makes sense only if it does not frustrate the development of the virtues,

including in particular those being measured. It should be uncontroversial that the fostering of the virtues, and students' independent evaluation of them, are educationally far more fundamental than the assessment of students' virtuousness and the effectiveness of our efforts to foster them. And we must Do No Harm: However we assess student virtuousness and our efforts to foster it, that assessment must not frustrate our legitimate educational aims, including that of fostering virtue itself.

Conclusion

There are good reasons to be wary of educational assessment generally: It can distort our educational efforts and be counter-productive with respect to achieving our educational aims. It can work against teacher autonomy and contribute to teacher demoralization and attrition.

In addition to these general worries concerning assessment, assessing virtues face additional challenges: such assessment can distract from a focus on genuine virtues, even if we reject the situationist critique. It runs the further risk of harming our efforts to foster students' rational autonomy by imposing a pre-digested list of virtues and understanding of them. In so doing it risks violating the Kantian imperative to treat students with respect, as ends-in-themselves. It also runs the risk of ignoring the crucially important *epistemic* dimension of judgment. For these reasons we must be very careful in our efforts to assess both student virtues and our efforts to foster them: Productive assessment is not impossible in principle, but it's difficult, and the dangers are real and significant.

References

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