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Accountability for Teaching and Learning of Virtue

Hugh Sockett

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**School of Education
University of Birmingham
Edgbaston
Birmingham**

Accountability for Teaching and Learning of Virtue

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Hugh Sockett, George Mason University

It has become a test of the nation's educational virility, as this Conference Proposal puts it, that 'we' "must know whether programmes work. A standard demand -is that interventions offer pre-tests and post-tests to demonstrate success....via randomised controlled trial." I am going to take this description as a content-free definition of measurement within the question "Can Virtue be Measured?" although I am aware that the concept of measurement deserves rather more attention than I will give it here.

This paper is in three parts. First, it indicates two crippling weaknesses in the behaviorist presuppositions of the demand that virtue be measured, first, in terms of its epistemological commitment to observed behavior as providing the only warranted knowledge of action, and second in its inability to encounter mental acts. Second, I suggest that we need to contrast the market economy of financial or production capital, whose influence on educational testing has been so destructive, with an account of the moral economy with social capital within which we can more coherently address the challenge of virtuous accountability. Finally, I develop a framework for a different accountability structure based on Harré and Secord's (1972) much neglected articulation of an anthropomorphic model of man in the explanation of social behavior. Such a structure rejects a view of the student as a mere unit in a system, and replaces it with a view of both the individual person, entailing respect for *individual* intentions, motivations, imagination and the *collective* context for which both teachers and students are accountable.

I. Behaviorist pre-suppositions.

Psychological testing, as with intelligence tests, is rooted in the behaviorist tradition where Psychology as a natural science seeks prediction and control of behavior. Though sometimes linked with logical positivism, the epistemological structure of behaviorism, as with natural science, originated in Mill's (1843) *Logic of the Moral Sciences*. He argued, with Comte, that in rational action means are separate from ends and the two are connected solely through causal empirical connections. To determine whether the means chosen bring about the ends, measurement, metrics, evaluations etc. are needed to inform the agent on the improvement of the means to achieve the ends, which, in the vocabulary of behaviorist psychology, becomes the feedback loop of S-R theory: Thence the quasi-scientific demand for measurement expressed in such terms as pre- and post- tests, and randomized controlled trials. Measurement of performances is intended to yield control, proof, and prediction, when combined with other variables in a context.

It is unnecessary here to describe the historical origins of behaviorism or its influence on education, although this is usually traced to Thorndike and intelligence testing and to Tyler's (1949) 8-year study of progressive education. Rational curriculum planning was centered in measurable behavioral objectives. (In its heyday, one could see cars parked in the lot of the Stanford School of Education with the bumper sticker *Help Stamp Out Non-behavioral Objectives*.) The vocabulary has become a commonplace in education, as the success of Bloom's Taxonomy (1966) indicates, but in recent years accountability systems have become audits, driven by industrial and commercial methodologies of measurement that, it is casually assumed, must apply to education: hence the question "what works?" Much more, it must be noted, should be said about the concepts of audit

and accountability and how they are connected, the obvious distinction in practice being that no agent conducts his or her own audit. However, one doyen of the market economy, former Lockheed Martin CEO Norman Augustine (2013) put it recently “...measuring something is often the best way to maximize or improve it”. The word “often” here is ambiguous. It might imply that there may be other ways to improve performance (e.g. by giving everyone a wage increase): or it might imply that not everything is susceptible to measurement in the service of improvement: for instance, sex, marriage, religious belief, virtue - to name but a few. For the production of inanimate artefacts in industrial processes, (aircraft in Augustine’s case) does not require a view of the mental characteristics of the objects, unlike, say, Jeremy Bentham’s (1789) extraordinary felicific calculus of pain and pleasure. The lesson we learn from this is that an appropriate form of measurement must match the content that is being measured. But, of course, we can bend the content out of shape into inappropriate measurement matrices, thereby changing the content for the sake of pre and post-tests, or randomized controlled trials.

Behaviorism, however, is identifiable in 3 categories: analytic (where there is no such thing as mind), metaphysical (where there is agnosticism about mind) and methodological, where, whatever one’s belief on the first two, it is held to be the appropriate scientific approach: behavior, the doctrine goes, is all we have to observe. (Mace, 1948). Forms of measurement of the kind mentioned in the Proposal and by Augustine (Norman, not Saint) celebrate a commitment to methodological behaviorism, that is, the view that only observable performances can provide data appropriate to efficient evaluation. Yet that leaves formidable mind-body problems to one side. As Thomas Nagel (2012) puts it:

Behaviorist strategies all..... “assume that all that needs to be said about the content of a mental statement is what would verify or confirm it, or warrant its assertion, from the point of view of an observer. In one way or another, they reduce mental attributions to the externally observable conditions on the basis of which we attribute mental states to other.” (38).

Indeed, the claim that observable behavior is the only epistemological warrant for saying that A knows x, or that A has Y dispositions or virtues is either trivially true, or it is false. It is trivially true in the ecclesiastical sense that “by their fruits, ye shall know them.” Some, but not all of our judgments about others issue from their actions, whatever the context. But it provides inadequate, indeed false, warrant for at least the following two reasons. First is the obvious matter of intention. In observing a person’s actions, I cannot often be sure that the intentions I ascribe are those that the person has, and on which he or she is the authority. The problem of intention raise question of guess-work v. knowing and of pretence v. authenticity. Take, for instance the multiple-choice test. If a student gets the answer right on a multiple-choice test, a teacher cannot prove whether the answer is either the result of a guess or a true indicator of knowledge, (nor, one might add, often would the student). The teacher is epistemologically stuck, for such tests ignore intention. No reliable warrant on the student’s knowledge can be gleaned in this way. All data so measured therefore may or may not be reliable, which is, to say the least, scientifically unsatisfactory. The practical upshot, as we well know, is that for many teachers, tests simply push to one side concern with what the student knows, properly knows, because the methodological behaviorism paradigm dominates. However, with authenticity, on matters of virtue intention is especially critical, and observable behavior offers some but not a

satisfactory guide. To act with what looks like compassion may conceal the intention of self-advertisement. Even avowal of one's intentions does not necessarily reflect one's intentions, as Uriah Heep reminds us.

The second critical problem for methodological behaviorism in the acquisition of virtue is that individual acts or actions do not reveal what Bernard Williams (1973) calls "the moral cast of the man beneath the speech-act" (217). What is at stake here is not just intention, though that must be part of the framework, but who a person is, what his or her authentic commitments truly are, and, we must add, who he or she is becoming. This has special significance because acquiring and manifesting such commitments and virtues is central to personal identity. Identity is, of course, dynamic, not static: it is fluid over a life-span or even part of a life, so any measure at any particular time may have little predictive force and thus be unreliable in terms of who a person is becoming. Indeed, the open-minded liberal student can become a closed-mind curmudgeon in middle age. Yet fluidity of identity (and thus of values held) is also subject to the kinds of oscillations Aristotle first picked out with *akrasia*. But that fluidity can, and morally speaking must occur in how we conduct our life, whatever our moral cast, and whatever our personal identity, in our dealing with moral dilemmas, making judgments in reconciling different commitments, or simply in whether we avoid paralysis in making such judgments. Morally must, because open-mindedness is a central intellectual and moral virtue. Methodological behaviorism cannot cope with such intricacies, because it fails to treat people as human beings.

These considerations imply that any behavioral measurement of virtue at any one time is essentially unreliable, not objective, as it could tell us little or nothing about the intentions or the moral cast of the student. Just as such measurements are already

undermining the way in which students understand the epistemological complexity of the disciplines, so any such attempt to use them in the contexts of the teaching and learning of virtue will simply corrode the integrity of that educational purpose. We need therefore to create a virtuous system of accountability, and if we must use the term, a virtuous system of measurement within it. We can start with an account of the moral economy in which such a structure must be set.

II The Moral Economy of Teaching and Learning

The Conference Proposal indicates that we, somehow, must find ways to show that our commitment to the teaching and learning of virtue can be justified by results. Of course, we must be accountable both internally, so to speak, to students, teachers or parents, and externally to public constituencies of different kinds. Accountability is simply the obligation to deliver a report. Reports can take various forms, of course, and data can be very useful in their construction. But mere data is an audit, a barren form of accountability. For example, the Virginia Department of Education lists copious results of measurements of different kinds on schools, (of tests, of ethnic diversity in the school, of teacher qualifications) but how it is to be interpreted demands knowing what the problem is to which the data provides a solution. Similarly with a report: it must be in some way an explanatory answer to a question. So a first principle for virtuous accountability is that the report contains an explanation of why what is being reported is as it is. That seems to me intellectually honest.

However, that is not enough. In place of accountability/measurement models drawn from behaviorism and the market economy, we need to develop models based in

what I call the moral economy, located in civil society in a democracy. (I owe this notion of the moral economy to Condren (2006).)

Too often, notwithstanding the tenets of neo-liberalism, government seems to be so dominant in our lives that we ignore the fact that, as democratic citizens, we live in civil society, of which family and multiple forms of association are the most noticeable elements. It is both appropriate and necessary, for instance, that governments regulate car production through safety standards and rules of the road enforceable at law that constrain how we behave as drivers. But the multiple ways in which we use cars e.g., shopping, picking up the kids, going to the mountains or the south of France, are indicative of the variety of life in civil society and *for these government is neither in control nor responsible*. Similarly, our commitment to capitalism and a market economy (mixed or not) too often overshadows the moral economy central to civil society. Much of our life in civil society is not conducted on market principles, of profit or greed, but on norms of trust, friendship, shared responsibilities, and commitment to the intrinsic value of the other, as a human being, not as a customer. We need to re-assert the primacy of civil society and to see education as part of it.

By *moral economy* I mean the exchange of goods and services not for profit. While we must be careful to avoid reductionism, the differences are clear between the two.

First, the basic incentive of the market economy is self-interest. The basic incentive of the moral economy is reciprocal service - set within what de Tocqueville called the "pursuit of common desires".

Second, the market economy relies on market reciprocity, i.e., playing the rules of the market without consideration for others, qua persons. Nobody in the big store cares if

the small stores go out of business. The moral economy, on the other hand, celebrates community reciprocity, where each person serves and is served in the multitude of ways that people gain satisfaction (see Cohen, 2009).

Third, currencies in the market economy are forms of money, cash, gold, derivatives etc.. Currencies in the moral economy vary, but are usually without cash value. A casual cricket team, will share out and take turns in handling the kit, organizing the fixtures, and being captain, where the shares offered by individuals are the currency arising from the sense of obligation service entails. Barter and reciprocal exchanges are common, for example, in baby-sitting circles.

Fourth, the purpose of the market economy is the development of personal wealth and capital, which economists since Adam Smith (and many a politician) have regarded as a public good. The moral economy's implicit purpose and effect, however, is the development of social capital, not individual capital. Social capital refers to the connections among individuals, as Robert Putnam (1994) writes about it, that are the stocks in the moral economy (see Putnam, 1994, 2001). It is also understood as social networks together with the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.

Fifth, *in the moral economy, therefore, all relationships are viewed as social property, as well as individual property*, somewhat in the way that 5th Century Athenians regarded *eleutheria* as both individual and collective. Social capital embodies what might be called "civic virtue," not seen as the individual's property, but located in a network of reciprocal social relations. (One could envisage a society of intellectually virtuous individuals but that society would not necessarily be rich in social capital. Think of a university department, for instance.) A sense of belonging, trust, and the experience of social networks includes such

norms as truthfulness and other virtues. The whole, that is the social capital developed through a moral economy, is more than the sum of its parts, the contributions of various individuals. Communities as associations embody, more or less, reciprocity and trust, and perhaps the intellectual and moral virtues that one might describe as a part of a community's ethos. It thus seems to me critical to regard many virtues that we consider as features of the individual as the property of the community, for they are constitutive of social capital in that community.

This account of the moral economy thus leads me to the conclusion that education, as a right in a democratic society directed at human flourishing, cannot be an appendage to the market economy, with its individualist perspectives and narrowness of focus. Rather education is a central feature of the moral economy in civil society, even though it is publicly financed and governments have disastrously sought to regulate curriculum in such a way as to make the demands of the market economy over-riding. Indeed, the intractable problems of inequality of opportunity may be, at least in part, due to the schools' adherence to destinations for the children as dictated by market economy, rather than a focus on the development of social capital, especially in under-privileged communities. For, such inequality is most apparent in those communities, according to Putnam (2007), where social capital is so seriously lacking.

However, the two economies do have two important relationships. First, the market economy must, for its personnel, draw on the talents of people educated within the moral economy, where social capital is created engendering values and attitudes of service and virtue. Second, social capital brings with it significant economic benefits as Putnam demonstrates in his various analyses, for membership in the networks of the moral

economy facilitates market relationships: I need a plumber, for example, and a friend in my choir has a brother who is a plumber.

III Towards a virtuous system of accountability

What then is a virtuous system of accountability in teaching and learning, set within a moral economy? This is an exploratory account of a direction to take once we have totally abandoned the dominant paradigm as epistemologically flawed and morally exiguous.

I have alluded to the notion that methodological behaviorism does not treat people as human beings. Harré and Secord (1972) argue that explaining social behavior demands an anthropomorphic model of man, not the mechanical model of methodological behaviorism, and I am drawing heavily on their work in this account. Accountability, I hold, must be framed as providing an answer to a question, explicit or implicit: as such it is an explanation of social behavior; we deliver reports on what has happened in a specific context that may or may not be full of explanatory detail.

What do we want from **a framework of virtuous accountability in teaching and learning**? These seem to me to be some necessary, but not sufficient, normative criteria:

1) It is intellectually virtuous in its regard for the complexity of the human being and of the context;

2) It is fully explanatory in the interests of truthfulness and respect for that complexity both of the human being and the context;

3) Accounts are given of concrete or imagined acts and actions within a full description of the context or community where such acts and actions are manifest, where outcomes are envisaged, situations enacted, choices made and commentaries given;

4) The focus of all its reports is the episode, not the performance, putting the report in a social context,

5) The episode is described and explained through the self-reports of all actors and commentators, and

6) The design respects all these characteristics and is made publicly accessible.

(1) and (2) demand that accountability is truthful and respectful of the complexity of human situations and human beings. (3) distinguishes **the concrete episode and the imagined episode**. For, in the acquisition of virtue, the capability to imagine situations, to put one's self in the place of hypothetical others, is an essential intellectual and moral partner to acting virtuously. (6) reminds us of the need for public accountability, without surrendering the integrity of virtuous accountability and finding out ways to do this. It is on the self-report and the episode that we must focus our attention.

(5) **The Self-Report**. It is, as Harré and Secord put it, "through reports of feelings, plans, intentions, beliefs, reasons and so on that the meanings of social behavior and the rules underlying social acts can be discovered." (7) Needed are *accounts* (note the noun) of both actors and commentators: "the actor's own statements about why he performed the act in question, what social meanings he gave to the actions of himself and others" for "in social situations people (*including children*) present themselves under what they take to be suitable personas". (9) (my italics) Such self-reports are not theoretical, but couched either in concrete or carefully imagined situations.

4) **The Episode**. This is the core framework for virtuous accountability in which reports carry explanations. Harré and Secord see the *episode* as central to the analysis of all social life: it is "sequence of happenings in which human beings engage which has some

principle of unity". ".....explanation is not complete," they argue, "until differing accounts are negotiated and further, put into the context of an *episode* structure." An accountability report will therefore focus, not on the individual or the system performance, or the measured performances of a grouping within a system, but of an *episode*. Following Harré and Secord (chapters 8 through 14), the following are the characteristics of an episode.

a) An episode has an internal structure of rules and roles where individuals make (or fail to make) clear choices.

b) Episodes are formal or enigmatic. *Formal* episodes are ceremonials (like the presentation of a prize) or rituals (e.g. a wedding or a funeral), usually with a specific liturgy, either of rule or custom. The *enigmatic* episode is so called because, though rules and roles may be enacted, these may be abandoned, reshaped, or neglected within an episode, especially in teaching and learning.

c) Within all episodes, individuals act and are acted upon but the collective experience of an episode may be dynamic as the episode unfolds. That is, many enigmatic episodes are not just happenings or experiences, say where a class watches an eclipse, but one in which the collective experience is changing.

d) The *enigmatic* episode structure has two levels: "overt (the act-action sequence) and covert (the permanent and transitory powers and states of readiness and the flux of emotions that underlie the episode.)"(12)

e) Episodes will be described from different viewpoints through self-reports (by teachers, students or observers). They may rely for explanation on habit, reflection or deliberation (as in a plan). In a different dimension, the account of the enigmatic episode

can also be anticipatory, retrospective or contemporaneous and include explanation and justification for one's own actions or those of others.

f) The reports of an enigmatic episode will make explicit (or not) the propriety of the actions made in terms of principles, commitments, moral and intellectual virtues, or what we may call educational objectives.

To begin constructing a different paradigm for virtuous accountability in teaching and learning of virtue, we thus need to frame our reports through episodes that reveal the complexity of human beings and contexts, that are fully explanatory to audiences, that celebrate different viewpoints through self-reports. Let me end with an example of an episode from my own classroom this last Fall. I regard it as of educational importance, sufficient for me to deliver a report to you, not because I am reporting on a set of individual performances, but because it illustrates the complexity of the individual and the collective experience that are far more salient than those performances. It is incomplete, as it lacks the self-reports of others, mainly students. It embodies all the criteria I have sketched for an episode.

Danielle and the Class Discussion. This episode took place in my Government 101 class in the last semester where approximately 120 undergraduates were present. The session was on the US Bill of Rights. The context is this: I articulated the US Constitution as embodying (or not in the case of slavery) principles of liberty and equality, with a focus on Bill of Rights (the first 13 amendments to the Constitution) which was developed as an instrument for correcting the absence of the status of the citizen in the original Constitution. The episode began as students went into their usual groups to discuss which of the clauses that they would change or delete, and what new clauses might be needed in

the light of previous discussions on human rights. Immediately (and unsurprisingly), as we came back into full class discussion, one or more groups pointed to the Second Amendment that is nowadays interpreted as the individual (not the collective) right to bear arms. This is an important topic in democratic theory and practice, as it demands attention to the wording, the status of rights, the authors' intentions, the legislative history, the power of lobbies, the rights of individual States of the Union, and of course the contemporary politics surrounding tragedies all too regular across the nation.

Shipley spoke for his group: a forceful articulation of the arguments for revision through regulation, and various other groups advocating change chimed in. Richard then reported on his group with equal passion on the fundamental rights of gun ownership, including the possibility of overthrowing the government as mentioned both in the Declaration of Independence and, of course, in Locke's Second Treatise. Various comments followed. Then Danielle, back in class after 4 weeks, interjected. She told the class that 4 weeks previously her mother had been shot and killed in the Navy Yard Rampage, where 12 people died. She spoke with suitable control but powerful emotion and she began to shift the discussion to the prevalence of mental illness that, she argued, makes regulation of guns, though not the right to bear arms as a principle, essential for society. The discussion paused as the wave of sympathy washed over the collective class. Both protagonists, Shipley and Richard (and others) expressed their sorrow. One student wept. Both agreed something ought to be done about mental illness, but neither thought it affected their stance on the Second Amendment. And we moved on to other amendments. Several students wrote of their reactions to this episode in their journals.

Giving an account of the work done in this classroom through episodes seems to me much more significant in terms of the teaching and learning of virtue (and of democratic theory) than reports on individual performances – either of students or of teachers. This episode is replete with virtue considerations, open-mindedness, compassion both for the victim and the assassin, questions of individual rights against the common good, the detail of democratic theory, the individual and the collective experience, and the overt and the covert in Harré and Secord's terms. That Danielle spoke as she did illustrated her view of the classroom as an environment of trust, one in which social capital is being built.

To conclude. Finding a public and virtuous framework with which to break out of the shackles of the trivialities of measurement is a critical responsibility for educators, especially those with an interest in the teaching and learning of moral and intellectual virtue, which of course, should be the priority of every teacher. That requires invention and experiments that will tax both our intellectual and political judgment. Indeed, if my arguments are in the right direction succumbing to the dominant paradigm is not just epistemologically and moral unacceptable, but politically crass.

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