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**What difference does (or can) acquiring the vocabulary of the virtues and vices make to people old enough to be interested in self-improvement/being good?**

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For a personal reason I’ll tell you about in a moment, I really do believe that the best strategy for moral self-development is employing the vocabulary of the virtues and vices. But teaching a third year undergraduate course on the Nic Eth (with a crash intro on modern VE) for the last ten years, and reading a paper of Sophia Vasalou’s generated in me a worry about implementing this strategy, and currently I am rather gloomily thinking that teaching the vocabulary quite young is going to be essential. So I’m going to tell you about that and see if you share my worry and hope you have some suggestions about how to meet it.

The personal reason is, in general terms, probably the reason almost everyone has for thinking they have found the road to human salvation – I had an epiphany.

I was, in my latish twenties, in the second or third year of my first teaching job in one of the Oxford colleges, quite an achievement for a simple colonial girl. But the achievement had come at some cost. Having battled the extreme sexism and philistinism of NZ in the 60s to get as far as Oxford, I then found myself having to fight not philistinism but snobbery and an even more extreme sexism. So I had been fighting for almost ten years and the result was that I had undone quite a bit of the excellent ethical upbringing my parents had given me. I was still good at friendship and loyalty, but beyond my circle of friends I had made myself intolerant, aggressive, and cruelly sharp-tongued.

I was not, at that time, interested in ethics though of course I had been going to Philippa Foot’s classes and of course I taught it in college –mostly utilitarianism and Hare and so on. And indeed, Foot’s Moral Beliefs –but somehow I didn’t think of *any* of it as actually engaging with my life, any more than I thought about all the prevalent sense-data stuff and the problem of our knowledge of the external world – which I also taught - as engaging with my life.

And then one day, in preparation for a tutorial, I was re-reading Moral Beliefs for the nth time and for the nth time reread the very eudaimonist bit near the end where she’s defending the idea that justice is more profitable than injustice … and Alakazam! the scales fell from my eyes. ‘What am I *doing*?’ I thought. (I meant ‘doing with myself/my life.’) ‘I don’t want to be *tough*. I want to be *good*.’ (Well actually, I remember I thought ‘nice’. But I meant ‘good’.) And I became a born-again Aristotelian and set about trying to develop most especially charity (particularly with respect to using my clever tongue to say kind things rather than cruel ones.) I was still many years off becoming a virtue ethicist, but, prompted by Foot’s paper (I suppose) I *had* thought “I want to be nice/good” not “I want to do the right thing” and my educational background –Shakespeare, Jane Austen, George Eliot, etc. my parents’ and their friends’ constant quoting of the King James Bible had made much of the traditional virtue vocabulary entirely familiar to me.

But this very fact – that I could curb my tongue by thinking ‘Now Rosalind, is that *kind* ,’ and stall my impulse to cut a male fellow graduate down to size by thinking ‘Be *charitable* –he’s probably just showing off what he’s read because I’ve just been chatting to Anscombe and calling her Elizabeth and he thinks I’m part of an elite inner circle, not that I’m the ignoramus I am’ – the fact that much of the virtue vocabulary, in its traditional sense, was quite natural to me, was, I have realised only recently, not as unremarkable a fact as I took it to be at the time.

The realisation has come from reading a fascinating paper by Sophia Vasalou called ‘Educating Virtue as a Mastery of Language’. It is a very subtle and complex paper which I cannot possibly summarise with justice, so I’ll just concentrate on the aspect that fascinated me.

To put in its proper setting, I’ll tell you straight off that Vasalou is firmly on my side – that is, she believes that by and large – hos epi to pollu – we need to use the explicit language of the virtues to accomplish moral self-improvement. But she sees a difficulty about this which I now realise I have dimly apprehended during my last decade of teaching the Aristotle class, but never recognised clearly before. In brief, she claims that the use of the traditional virtue language, in everyday ethical reflection on everyday scenarios – surely the meat and drink of moral improvement – is *manifestly* inappropriate, artificial, unnatural, out of place. Not of course in the lives of people like us, but as academics, we’re in a minority group and as academics who know about virtue ethics in a teensy weensy mini-minority one. And we need to be aware of that fact.

She illustrates this inappropriateness through her discussion of a very nice example I’ll give in full.

Imagine, then, you are at your family home and one of your distant relatives is visiting; disagreeable aunts and uncles abounding in the world of extended families, this is someone you have little desire to engage with, and would prefer to unload the entire burden of entertaining her (call it a her) to the culpable member of your family who had the misconceived idea of inviting· her. This is also a time, as it happens, when you have just started work on an exciting new project. This being the beginning of summer and the start of true intellectual otium, all you can think of is to pick up your cup of morning coffee and set down straight to work. You stop by the kitchen and it should be just your luck that you find her sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee in front of her, looking up to give you that sweet, dull smile of hers upon your entry. You flinch with annoyance. Might a quick getaway still be possible, you wonder, while your aunt continues to smile sweetly? A sense of guilt has already crept into your animosity. Dash it all, you realise she is a gentle and good-natured type overall, though you have always found her unbearably dull. You know, too, that it is all for the best that *someone* has the idea of inviting aunts and uncles over once in a while, otherwise you would have a family only in name. And what are families about if not about having relationships with people you do not personally feel you have much in common? Reproaching yourself for your ill temper, you say to yourself, "You shouldn't be like that. In these circumstances, you should be-" And now you pause: what is that word for which you are reaching in order to describe the attitude called for in this situation?

She then considers an array of possible answers she might give in which she identifies the moral weakness she might think she was betraying -‘You should be more philosophical, patient, tolerant, forbearing flexible …’and lots more but notes that the scenario ‘would be especially likely to flag one key trait of character found in all the traditional handbooks of the virtues’ namely a deficiency in benevolence or kindness. And surveying this array of terms, she finds a difference. She finds an admonition to be philosophical, or patient, or tolerant etc to seem ‘perfectly in order and intelligible as a command one might give to oneself or to others’ (p.69) but that this is not so with the term benevolence.

It, she says, ‘trails certain additional implications which get in the way of its appropriateness’ (p. 70 )which she identifies as its having a ‘certain additional heaviness or force’ (p.71). She has said earlier that it would *embarrass* her to say to herself, standing in the doorway ‘You should be more benevolent’, and having got the heaviness point, she thinks she can now say why –‘I would experience the inappropriateness of the term as an excess of grandeur and of a burdensome gravitas, which I could ill afford to step into without seeming absurd.’ (p.71) The grandeur brings with it a kind of piety that we tend to mock. ‘A word like this is decidedly not a word I am capable of using in a command to myself to make small talk with my aunt or cousin sitting a trace dully in the kitchen without laying myself open to laughter.’(72)

She says one might think that the inappropriateness that the term benevolence seems to bring to the envisaged scenario was simply the result of its now carrying associations it didn’t have in Hume or even Mill’s day, just as the old virtue term ‘charity’ has connotations it didn’t have at the time of the King James Bible. As she notes, the latter now ‘carries the twin burdens of a Christian legacy as well as the associations derived from a certain kind of philanthropic activity implying an unequal relation between giver and receiver.’ (p.72) (My colleague Glen Pettigrove tells me that this was true of the term even in Hume’s day and that’s why he uses benevolence rather than charity as most modern ethicists do to this day.) And outside moral philosophy, the description ‘benevolent’ is now largely restricted to Father Christmas and smiles; it’s not really used as a virtue term any more.

But she doesn’t think that that is the answer, because she goes on to envisage

admonishing herself at the doorway, ‘in these circumstances you should be ki*nd* ‘. Now kindness, unlike benevolence and charity, is still operating just fine as part of everyday moral discourse, *and* moreover as a virtue term (as much as any do nowadays) but she finds its use in her scenario just as embarrassing, just as inappropriate, as she found the use of the term benevolent, and for just the same reason –its ‘excess gravity’ in its application to ‘the relatively short stature or insignificance of the situation at issue.’ (p.72. Describing pausing at the doorway to ‘exchange a few words of good morning, even to sit down and share a quick morning chat with a visiting relative who is sitting idly in the kitchen without (and here is the clincher) giving sign of the least bit of misery’ –describing such a small event as an act of *kindness* (either to myself or to commend it in someone else)just seems over the top.

I shall be interested to hear your reaction to those claims but I thought that, as claims about *ordinary everyday moral vocabulary* they are absolutely right. And they highlighted what I have often sensed as *odd* in the things I say to the students in my Aristotle ethics class using these terms. I have quite often felt compelled to say to them ’I sound like a Victorian preacher don’t I’, when I’m talking about benevolence-or-charity, and (of course) ‘temperance’. And I can see that they are somewhat relieved by this confession but still rather uncomfortable about the fact that I’m doing so. Or, having given as an example of, say, a kind act, something similar to Vasalou’s (rather than what the students nearly ALWAYS some up with, namely giving to a beggar) and sensed that somehow it hasn’t quite worked, I have, again quite often told them about Catholic children being taught to write the latin phrase for ‘to the greater glory of god’ at the top of all their school work, to remind them that even that mundane activity could be done in order to give glory to God, or, as Aistot6elians would put it, could be done in accordance with virtue – and been conscious of the fact that *that* hasn’t worked either. And now I see part of the reason why. I’m giving a third year philosophy lecture and I sound inappropriately, embarrassingly, ridiculously *pious* because most of the people in the class just don’t *use* these heavyweight words. And if and when they do, they reserve their use to describe much more morally significant actions – the sort perhaps that Foot characterised as those in which virtue is severely tested and comes through. I think my students might well accept my describing Vasalou’s sitting down to talk pleasantly to her beastly rude sexist -but manifestly lonely uncle - as kind, but not the scenario she describes.

Her third example is the term courage in relation to an example most of us will remember: we are about to give our first paper ever, and it’s at our first big conference ever and we are *terrified*. She uses this to illustrate the claim that the term courage is like benevolence,charity and kindness in the following two respects (a) that identifying a personal deficiency in that virtue as what one is manifesting in a mundane situation like this is often just what one needs to do with a view to moral self improvement but (b) the *use* of ‘I should be more courageous’ or ‘Rosalind don’t be so cowardly’ in that situation is, again, in ordinary usage, unnatural, inappropriate, artificial, ‘*cannot’* be done.

She thinks that, as before, the inappropriateness etc arises from the ‘additional implications’ of the term in ordinary language, amongst which is the implication that ‘a courageous act serves the good of those for the sake of whom one masters one’s fears’. I’m not sure whether she wants to say that this gives the term courage the heaviness,weight,grandeur etc which make the others inappropriate, but I’m inclined to think it does, though a different sort. If I bang on about being kind or benevolent in making small talk to my aunt I sound ridiculously pious; if I bang on about trying to be courageous re giving a good delivery of my paper I sound deplorably pretentious and self congratulatory – how can she describe herself as aspiring to do something courageous when it’s just something for her own benefit!

Now granted, that’s only four examples, only two of which moreover are on the Virtues Project’s list of 52, (though it also has ‘love’ which stands in for charity I’d say) but, as I said, it did, I thought, highlight a difficulty I had been dimly conscious of, and thereby gave me most furiously to think.

But having thought about it while writing this paper, and looking back at Vasalou’s scenario, I’m not sure she has put her finger exactly on the problem. She is assuming that anyone morally serious, thinking in ordinary everyday terms might *well* consider the set up *her* way –that is by considering whether the situation called for her to be more stoical, philosophical, patient, forbearing, tolerant, flexible, adaptable, mature, self-denying, gentler, … All *this* character trait vocabulary is fine she thinks, – it’s just the terms benevolent, charitable, kind and courageous which are odd and thereby problematic.

But now when I imagine some of my students at the beginning of my course in that scenario, it doesn’t seem likely to me that they are going to find it natural to think in Vasalou’s first set of terms *either.* Of course not all the students would count as ‘morally serious’ and fit into the scenario at all. No doubt the biggest difficulty regarding moral self-development is motivating people to aim to be good people, but that’s not my worry here. Quite a few students enrol in my class because, rather vaguely, or in some more specific way, they really *do* want to be good, and have heard that it’s an inspirational course in which I exhort them to. My worry stems from the fact that I’m pretty sure that most of these motivated students think of ‘being a good person’ simply as Doing Good capital letters.

So I’m not thinking about the unmotivated students, nor am I imagining that my motivated students won’t think in these other terms because they are somewhat “bookish” (ref) though most of them are. It seems to me that they won’t think in these terms because, quite simply, their thoughts *aren’t* going to start with *Vasalou’s* response to her sense of guilt. They are *not* going to start by reproaching themselves for *being* such and such, and telling themselves they should *be* so and so instead, as she does. They’re going to start by reproaching themselves for what they had been intending to *do*, namely make a quick getaway. ‘You shouldn’t *do* that ..’ they will say to themselves ‘It’s not right. You should sit down and make friendly noises.’ That’s obviously the right thing to do and, wanting to be good people, of *course* they want to do the right thing.

And that that’s the way their thoughts (I’m pretty sure) would go, makes a big difference, not only because, ex hypothesi, it doesn’t call for any reflection – it’s just obvious – but more importantly because it doesn’t involve any *self*- reflexion or soul-searching, any attempt to identify in oneself ‘the particular moral weakness’ which prompted the thought of the quick getaway and prevented sitting down and making friendly noises being one’s easy and unhesitating reaction to that sweet dull smile.

So what I see as the problem that Vasalou hasn’t quite got is that nowadays young people who, as I did, have realised that they want to be good, are significantly *unlike* me all those years ago. They *don’t* think of being a good person as *having* the virtuous character traits and thereby of *becoming* a good person as developing these. They think of *being* or becoming good as being or becoming someone who has a certain sort of job or occupation.

So they think of being a good person as being a doctor, or a psychotherapist or the sort of lawyer that specialises in defending the underdog or, like most of the students in my friend’s graduate class on human rights in the sociology department, of returning to their own country to go into politics or campaign for the rights of the persecuted or teach in the villages or work in refugee camps. Wanting to *be* good people, they want to *be* the sort of people who help others and make the world a better place, who *do* that sort of thing. Splendid! one might say. But as far as I –and my friend – can see, it just hasn’t occurred to them that being an *effective* doctor, lawyer, therapist, politician, campaigner, village teacher etc. *actually* helping people and making the world a better place, might require rather more than acquiring the relevant qualifications. It’s as though they think that they already *have* the inner resources to Do Good capital letters all the time – all that is lacking is the opportunity, which the morally significant job will provide. (Of course they don’t actually think that, because, again, they haven’t thought of *any* inner resources (beyond their good intentions) as having to come into it at all.) So, going back to Vasalou’s list, I don’t think it has occurred to them that, unless they can make themselves more patient, or tolerant or forbearing, or gentler or flexible or …. they’re almost bound to do a rotten job.

So I think the difficulty, by and large, with getting even motivated young people to think the right way about moral self development is getting them to think about moral *self*-development at *all*. It’s not that they’re particularly smug and self-satisfied; it’s rather that- as an aspect of their virtuous idealism perhaps- they are all focussed on the evils of the world and what can be *done* about them; they assume, albeit unconsciously, that this is what serious ethics/morality is *about*. We’re right back to never mind about Being, Doing is what matters.

There is another point in Vasalou’s paper that comes in here. Remember when I described her position I said it was that in *everyday* ethical reflection on *everyday* scenarios the heavyweight virtue term vocabulary was *manifestly* inappropriate, artificial, unnatural, out of place. And I added in passing that such everyday ethical reflection was surely the meat and drink of moral self-development, agreeing with Vasalou’s saying (p.72) that ‘There is no scenario that is so mundane that it may not express and conversely train (moral) character.’ Near the end of her paper, speaking of the heavyweight terms, and on the assumption that their use, inappropriate and artificial as it may be nowadays, may well be what is needed for moral self-development, she notes that what would have to be recognised is that ‘big words (the heavyweight ones) may be needed for small events’ (the first scenario).’ And I think a slightly amended version of that is right.

It is because, as a virtue ethicist, she naturally thinks of actions – mundane or not - in terms of their expressing or training character that she imagines the response she does in her mundane scenario. But if, like my students, you are thinking of Doing Good capital letters, or righting the evils in the world, you are thinking of a rat5her limited set of actions – those that are very significantly morally right or wrong, - as having, in Vasalou’s perceptive terminology, a certain degree of grandeur and gravitas - and a lot of your everyday mundane actions are just going to be under your radar. Monitoring oneself throughout the day as to whether or not one is Doing Good (capital letters) in mundane situations would seem inappropriate, artificial, unnatural. After all, it’s quite obvious that one *isn’t* which is just why the students are burning to start on that morally significant job and get away from the trivia of the life they are living now.

*We* may recognise many of their mundane actions as quite possibly expressing or shaping character, but, again, that’s because it’s the way *we* think. But for my students, unless some real twinge of guilt prompts them to recognise that they have done or are about to do, something definitely wrong, they won’t, in the relevant sense, think about what they are *doing* day to day at all. And even if a twinge does make them think, it won’t, I claimed above, necessarily lead any one of them to reflect “What flaw in *me* prompted *me* not to do the right thing here?” or “Do *I* make this kind of little mistake often? Hmmm” that is, not to any *self*-reflexion at all.

So my current view is that what my students need to recognise is not so much that ‘big words may be needed for small events’ as that, unbeknownst to them, their characters are being formed, for well or ill, in many of those small events that constitute their everyday actions. So they call for serious attention. (Maybe our catchphrase should be ‘mighty oaks from little acorns grow.’)

Moreover, they call for attention couched in the vocabulary of the virtue and vice words, because without this to hand, they won’t have the means to interrogate the *sources* of their actions at hand, even if they do give the actions serious attention.

So, as I said at the outset, at the moment I am thinking rather gloomily that this vocabulary will have to be made much more familiar, and the practical question is how. Of course the Virtues Project, properly implemented, would be the ideal method, but Darcia’s idea of ‘chronic priming’ at school, if I have understood it correctly, sounds to me as though it might at least be a great help.