

## **“CHARACTER IS DESTINY” FOR BOTH PERSONS AND NATIONS**

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My religion is loving kindness.  
--The Dalai Lama

When one thinks of the question “Which came first--moral rules or virtues?” the obvious answer, I believe, is that the virtues came first. Moral imperatives are abstractions from thousands of years of observing loyal, honest, patient, just, and compassionate behavior, just as moral prohibitions have come from equally ancient experiences with the vices. Found in all religious and philosophical literature, virtue ethics is as old as the hills. It has a lot to teach us today as we try to find our moral bearings in a complex and confusing world.

Critics of virtues ethics claim that virtues vary across cultures, so it is impossible to choose which are the correct ones. In response, I say we should celebrate this rich diversity of human experience and learn to tolerate the minor vices that irritate us. Even as abstractions, moral rules still have normative force, so the laws of nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights serve as a check on practices that most human beings find detestable.

English philosopher Leslie Stephen once described virtue ethics as follows: "Morality is internal. The moral law has to be expressed in the form, 'be this,' not in the form 'do this.' The true moral law says 'hate not,' instead of 'kill not.' The only mode of stating the moral law must be as a rule of character." People of good character and virtue require no reminder of what the rules are or what their duty is. A society of truly virtuous people would require few police, judges, and prisons.

Former Vice President Dick Cheney once said that conservation was a quaint personal virtue that had no relevance for the nation's energy policy. This comment reveals one of the greatest moral problems of our time: the false division between personal and civic virtue, and the corollary assumption that as long as citizens are not breaking any laws, they have no moral obligations to others or even to themselves.

“Procedural” liberals can no longer believe that the state is morally neutral, and that merely providing a minimal legal framework will automatically lead people to good and happy lives. This obviously has not happened, and the reason is that people generally do not have the virtues that are required to navigate the moral obstacles of contemporary life.

While insisting on the pursuit of the values of tolerance, equality, justice, and free discussion, liberals should join with conservatives in supporting virtue formation in our

families and character education in our schools. The very survival of our nation depends on such an alliance. Recent critics of character education in the schools argue that it has been taken over by conservatives with a political agenda. Liberals can only fault themselves for allowing this to happen, and for not sufficiently acknowledging the severe crisis of values in our country.

To overcome the criticism that character education is too ethnocentric, school curricula need to have teaching units that show how the virtues express themselves in the world's major cultures and religions. Children learn the virtues best from living examples but morally uplifting stories are the next best. *A Call to Character* edited by Colin Greer and Herbert Kohl is an excellent multicultural reader.

One of the advantages of discussing the virtues is that we can come to an agreement about them much more easily than arguing about moral rules. For example, the problem of sexual promiscuity could be reframed with a focus on the virtues of fidelity and personal integrity.

There should be no disagreement at all about the universal virtues of courage, loyalty, integrity, compassion, and justice, and there are very creative ways in which these values can be taught. I therefore support teaching these virtues set down by General Assembly of Virginia: "trustworthiness, including honesty, integrity, reliability, and loyalty; respect, including the precepts of the Golden Rule, tolerance, and courtesy; responsibility, including accountability, diligence, perseverance, and self-control; fairness, including justice and freedom from prejudice; caring, including kindness, empathy, compassion, consideration, generosity, and charity; and citizenship, including concern for the common good, respect for authority and the law, and community-mindedness."

One of the Dalai Lama's most profound statements is the following: "Take care of your thoughts because they become words. Take care of your words because they will become actions. Take care of your actions because they will become habits. Take care of your habits because they will form your character. Take care of your character because it will form your destiny, and your destiny will be your life."

The motto "character is destiny" is based on the simple moral truth that "you reap what you sow." Buddhists, Jains, and Hindus call this karma, and karma is nothing but the law of causality applied to the moral realm. The Buddha once said that "they who know causality know the Dharma." What this means is that if you are mindful of how your actions affect yourself and others, then you will know what you ought to do. It also means that if you develop the virtues at an early age, your good character will destine you to a good life.

Virtues are dispositions to act in ways that contribute to human flourishing, and we learn them as children by modeling the actions of others or reading about the heroes of great literature. Their good habits become our habits and all those virtues together form our national character. Growing up in the 1950s I learned from a family and a

nation that valued hard work, thrift, conservation of soil and energy, respect and compassion for others. We have gradually spent the treasure of moral capital that our country built up over two hundred years of history.

“Character is destiny” is a motto that applies not only for individual persons but for nations as a whole, and Americans need to rededicate themselves to this truth.

Nick Gier taught philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years.