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All that appears isn't necessarily so: morality, virtue, politics, and education

Robert P. Engvall
Roger Williams University, rengvall@rwu.edu

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All That Appears Isn't Necessarily So:

Morality, Virtue, Politics, and Education

By Robert P. Engvall

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Preface

In recent years, the frequency of social critics' attacks upon our collective "loss of virtue" have heightened. These attacks have centered upon our collective "failures" within various social structures. Concerns have been continually raised about our schools, our political foundations, and most recently, and no doubt most painfully, about ourselves. Such attacks on our "failures" now occur so routinely that we often treat the message as so obvious that it need only be mentioned to be accepted. This book attacks that message, not so much for its content, as for its method of delivery. In other words, I'm setting out to attack not the message, but the messenger. I might attempt to attack the message as well, but for the fact that the message is far too complicated for a person like myself to understand. "Virtue" is, after all, rather complicated.

Unfortunately in our "quick fix" society, we have been led to believe that merely following the advice of others or adhering to "virtues" as set forth in fairy tales and anecdotes will allow all of us to live in perfect harmony. Similarly, failure to adhere to the "advice" as suggested by the "self-proclaimed experts of virtue"

will accordingly lead us straight down the road to ruin—if not hell. While it is not my desire to burn in hell any more than most, it is troubling to me to think that following the words of William Bennett and/or Rush Limbaugh might improve my chances for a more temperate climate after death. In fact, as I hope this work addresses, following the words of persons like those might actually increase my chances of meeting eternal damnation, or at least improve my chances of listening to Limbaugh on radio and/or buying the collective works of Bennett, either of which could be easily misinterpreted as actually suffering in hell.

But Enough About Me...

Even if we accept the premise of our collective societal failure as true, the issue beyond lamenting our status becomes the more practical one of what might we do to correct this fall from grace. This work focuses upon how sadly misguided we have become (which may or may not support the thesis that we have lost our virtue) in the way that we so blindly accept what the "experts" on virtue tell us. If we have fallen, we will not get up through a careful adherence to the "virtues" presented in recent best-sellers. It is, sadly, more difficult than that. Contrary to much popular belief, virtue is not a "thing" that we have lost or misplaced. It is, therefore, more difficult to find than one's keys, or one's television remote control. Virtue is instead a journey, a continuing struggle, and hopefully perhaps a calling. A calling that should seldom be associated with the actual persons most successful at attacking the virtues of the rest of us while they ably proclaim their own.

A recent *Phi Delta Kappa / Gallup Poll* (1996) concerning our public schools tends to support our concerns over our "loss." Among its findings, "good citizenship" becomes the most frequently cited "purpose of the public schools" among respondents who were given a list of potential purposes. Since evidence of the

legitimacy and/or frequency of the problem is growing and our concern about the problem grows accordingly, we tend to be more susceptible to, and less critical of, remedies that might have little more value than the "tonics" and "cure-alls" sold from the back of wagons in bygone eras.

That we societally have lost something, or perhaps a sign that the apocalypse really is upon us, can easily be imagined with no more effort than a look into the windows of a bookstore. Rather than novels by John Steinbeck, Kurt Vonnegut, E.L. Doctorow, Ernest Hemingway, and countless other writers, we have works by such literary luminaries as Marcia Clark, Dennis Rodman, and Howard Stern. It is abundantly clear that we have indeed seen a transformation. This work argues, however, that it is less a transformation through a lessening of our collective "virtue" than it is a lessening of our collective intellectual capacities, which in turn makes us ripe for the kind of "blather" that we have come to expect to receive via television, but which we now unfortunately receive endlessly in print as well. The publishers cannot be blamed, at least entirely, as our free market society amply rewards those who publish the works of Rodman and Stern far more than it does those attempting to publish more "scholarly" works. To paraphrase our new American icon (and best-selling author) Rodman, it's more than a societal acceptance of "As Bad As I Wanna Be"—it's in fact a widespread societal conspiracy, practiced both knowingly and unknowingly by millions of Americans, the title of which might read "As Bad As We Allow It to Be."

Introduction

> Ideology...is an instrument of power; a defense mechanism against information; a pretext for eluding moral constraints in doing or approving evil with a clean conscience; and finally, a way of banning the criterion of experience, that is, of completely eliminating or indefinitely postponing the pragmatic criteria of success and failure.
>
> —Jean-Francois Revel

> Beware...of windbags and pious souls who presume to know what is moral for you and your family. (Katz, 1997, p. xxv)

In today's increasingly complex and multi-cultural world, and amid the American political climate of growing intolerance and widening polarity, there exists a real and present danger that threatens to underlie American social policy generally and educational policy specifically. This danger lies in the ever-expanding sphere of influence that many persons have acquired, despite lacking facts to support their views. Barbara J. Duncan (1997) writes: "...after the Reagan 'go-go' '80s, an era of fast profits, quick deals, and increased emphasis on individual prob-

lems and solutions, many Americans feel as if something is now missing from society" (p. 119). Witness the recent call to "volunteerism." The yawning gap between the rhetoric about helping the needy and the reality of mean-spirited public policy and budget cuts was "filled" by our proclamations about the great American tradition of volunteerism.

Among the most troublesome aspects of this "call to virtue," as it is often proclaimed, is that many of those most heard in their cries lamenting our present societal condition are the same persons who were at the forefront proclaiming the "virtue" of those "go-go" 80s. If the world has truly "gone to hell in a handbasket" as many would have us believe, it seems peculiar that we seek to be reshaped or even reborn under the guidance of those very same people who played a hand in leading us there. Meg Greenfield (1997) wrote of her fascination with our society's ability to grant "standing" to persons who seem to lack such authority. In her words, "standing to be listened to, or to be taken seriously on a subject" has been granted with too much frequency to too many. In my words, "I agree."

A great danger facing all of us, and particularly our youth, is less a loss of virtue than the belief on the part of some that youth need to follow one path to virtue and/or that "their virtues" are those that should be inculcated. The influence these "primers," particularly the most "virtuous" among them, and the value that the elixers they promote have upon social and educational policy is the centerpiece of this book.

> Vision has become self-contained and self-justifying—which is to say, independent of empirical evidence. That is what makes it dangerous, not because a particular set of policies may be flawed or counterproductive, but because insulation from evidence virtually guarantees a never-ending supply of policies and practices fatally independent of reality. Moreover, the pervasiveness of the vision of the annointed at all levels of the American educational system ensures future supplies of people indoctrinated with this vision and also convinced that they

> should "make a difference"—that public policy-making is to be seen as ego gratification from imposing one's vision on other people through the power of government. (Sowell, 1995, p. 241)

The annointed claim to share our society's "collective" vision of morality. When "annointed" is used pejoratively it refers to those "favored persons" frequenting the other side of the political spectrum, whichever side that happens to be. Our collective abilities to view ourselves as marginalized, while we simultaneously view our positions on social issues as "mainstream" is, and should be, a wonderment to us all. The "annointed" to Thomas Sowell seems to consist of "liberals" whose positions are propigated, in Sowell's view, without challenge. The "annointed" to me are persons like William Bennett and Rush Limbaugh, whose words are given far too much credibility, and challenged far too little, when indeed they are challenged at all. If we cannot even agree upon who are the "annointed" it will be dauntingly difficult to agree upon whose virtues should rule.

Perhaps even more important than whose "virtues" we might adhere to, is the rigid viewpoint that either the "right" or the "left" has sole control of the concept of virtue. Christopher Lasch (1995) laments his belief that both "left and right-wing ideologies are now so rigid that new ideas make little impression on their adherents" (p. 80). "The faithful," or "true believers" as Eric Hoffer would have referred to them, "have sealed themselves off from arguments and events that might call their own convictions into question" (pp. 80-81). Sealing themselves off from debate allows for the type of "candid conversation" that Limbaugh allows only those with his perspective. Al Franken's satirical and very popular work spoke of Limbaugh's radio show "screening" callers to make certain that all who receive airtime share the views of Limbaugh. Debate in such a venue is not only discouraged, it is entirely forbidden. Lasch writes: "Instead of engaging unfamiliar arguments, they are content to classify them as either orthodox or heretical" (p. 81). This description quite ably

defines Limbaugh and others like him who portray those who disagree as "femi-nazis, environmentalist whackos," and the like.

Before *The Book of Virtues* was released, James Q. Wilson (1993) foretold of the future in which political actors would exploit our loss of virtue (real and imagined) for political and personal gain. That future is here and now, and is not solely the province of Bennett, although he may be our best symbol of one who speaks for all of us (at least in his mind) when it comes to virtue. The trouble for some, myself included, lies in our abdication of the "virtuous highground" to someone like Bennett, who seems less a paragon of virtue than a paragon of divisiveness, competitiveness, and outright greed. Greenfield writes that those who best illustrate standing "never realize that there is a problem" (p. 86). If character really does count, as Bennett and others preached that it should during their campaign for Bob Dole's presidential candidacy in 1996, maybe our society's vision of character includes a wider cross-section of persons than those Bennett would care to admit to the virtuous highground. Rather than assume that character didn't count since their "character filled" man was defeated and another "character flawed" man was elected, perhaps they missed the point of what the concept of character was and remains all about. Perhaps the politics of "hope" and inclusiveness shows more "character" and more "virtue" than do the politics of divisiveness.

"Moral understanding and action depend on vision; vision depends on character; character must be shaped by those who come before us. But what justifies their claim to a vision of moral truth? By whom was their character shaped?" (Meilaender, 1984, p. 99). For whatever faults Bill Clinton brought and brings forth, perhaps the "character" of those who opposed him was equally as suspect. Most importantly, perhaps their claims to the appropriate vision of "moral truth" are shaky at best.

The debate over whether "virtue can and should be taught?" is not new. Scholars, both contemporary and ancient, have

considered the question. It was, in fact, the subject of Plato's *Protagoras*. Socrates himself expressed doubt that virtue could be taught (Meilaender, 1984). Our experience likewise "suggests that virtue cannot be taught" (Meilaender, 1984, p. 49). Of course G.C. Meilaender's book *The Theory and Practice of Virtue*, an academic discourse on the philosophy of virtue, sold hundreds of thousands less than did Bennett's *The Book of Virtues*. It seems, in our age of supermarkets (in the macroeconomic sense) and superconsumers, simple how-to lists are much more pleasurable than thoughtful treatises. Bennett's how-to lists seem to compare favorably to his former role as Secretary of Education, in which he oversaw top-down mandates and pleas for curricular and instructional uniformity; conformity to "his ways," as often the "only ways" if not the "virtuous ways." Conformity does not always illustrate character or virtue, certainly southerners who conformed to years of apartheid policies cannot claim virtue over opponents who brought down those conforming policies.

Neil Postman (1995) cites Americans' remarkable penchant for discourse on education. "There is no intellectual activity more American than quarreling about what education means, especially within the context of school" (p. 139). An important caveat, however, when discussing education, should be an awareness that "while it is possible to speak wisely about education, no one can speak definitively" (Postman, 1995, p. 139).

Speaking definitively about education and other subjects, however, is a skill quite ably honed by Bennett and others. As a remarkable testament to salespersonship (at least in view of the commercial success of Bennett's book) Bennett's own "virtues" seem to be in direct contrast to his "how-to lists" for others. Among Bennett's virtues seem to lie the inability to even communicate with one's "enemies," as illustrated by his widely reported January 1997 hostility toward his party's Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich for Gingrich's invitation to Jesse Jackson to sit in the Speaker's box for the State of the Union speech. The severity

of the attack by Bennett upon Gingrich is revealing in many regards. First, Gingrich's national unpopularity makes him an easy target even for those within his own party. To so attack an unpopular man is, apparently, among the virtues we know as "courage." Secondly, Bennett's verbal assault informs us of his belief in the Republican Party as representing "true conservatives" only. A significantly less sizable "big tent" than the Republicans, including Bennett, would have had us believe at their last convention. It appears the Republican Party, if Bennett had his way, would not be an inclusive "big tent," but a rather less inclusive "pup tent." Unless, of course, everyone believed as Bennett does, which, again apparently at least, would make them "virtuous" enough to share his space.

Character education's "fix the kids" orientation is a logical product of the school of thought that believes that kids need fixing (Kohn, 1997). While it seems unlikely that Bennett and others who might teach us "moral virtues" believe that their own children "need fixing," it seems equally likely that those (particularly those who dare to disagree with him and might impart "different" even "liberal" values on to their own children) do.

In marked contrast to the view that kids need fixing, first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton in her book *It Takes a Village* proclaims: "I have never met a stupid child, though I've met plenty of children whom adults insist on calling 'stupid' when the children don't perform in a way that conforms to adult expectations" (1996, p. 239). An approach that aims to "fix the kids" ignores volumes of accumulated evidence from the field of social psychology demonstrating that much of how we act and who we are reflects the situations in which we find ourselves (Kohn, 1997).

If we need to teach our students the "virtues," then perhaps as a prerequisite we might make certain that they understand the concept of "virtue." To actually become virtuous, we must surely realize, is far different from merely learning the virtues.

It is a high calling to seek to "instruct the conscience" of the student. Most of us, for a variety of reasons, settle for trying to "stimulate the intellect" (Meilaender, 1984, p. 75). College professors, certainly, try to "stimulate the intellect." In so doing, it seems, they cannot wholly escape from teaching values. Their values. Just as how we individually spend our disposable income reflects our values, so too does how we individually spend our time.

> Students learn values by observing how professors perform in and outside the classroom—professors who are dispassionate in their search for the truth, careful in their weighing of evidence, respectful in their toleration of disagreement, candid in their confession of error, and considerate and decent in their treatment of other human beings. (Freedman, 1996, p. 57)

Thomas J. Lasley, II (1997) agrees that "values are learned through observation and practice" (p. 655). Social learning complicates any attempt to "teach" values, and in a sound byte that would make a politician proud, Lasley proclaims "values are caught, not taught" (p. 655). Having said that, the impact that faculty members have upon students, while great, should not be overstated:

> Faculty members are reasonably intelligent human beings who have learned to do some things relatively well and who possess traits that can aid in the development of students; they are not necessarily paragons of virtue. (Mayhew, *et al.*, 1990, p. 134)