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Assigning Virtue in the Secular Academy: An Experimental Approach

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Abstract: This piece explores the purpose, value and results of an experimental assignment, “Personal Moral Inventory and Experience Project,” which has been used a few times in introductory ethics classes. It’s primarily descriptive; a fuller treatment would discuss possible (secular and Christian) justifications of, objections to, and improvements upon this (type of) assignment. But the assignment is an example of how to possibly prompt a particular kind of moral reflection.

Although I recently got tenure, I consider myself relatively young, inexperienced, and eager to learn from others on every academic front. This paper is primarily a descriptive summary of an unconventional assignment that I have experimented with a few times in my introductory ethics classes. A fuller treatment would discuss possible (secular and Christian) justifications of, objections to, and improvements upon each part of this (type of) assignment. If you have suggestions, please do share them with me.

I call the assignment a Personal Moral Inventory and Experience Project (hereafter “the project”). I have sometimes used it in my introductory ethics classes when I structure the semester around a historical survey of the Western moral tradition. We read Kelly James Clark and Anne Poortenga’s *The Story of Ethics*, Plato’s *Republic*, C. S. Lewis’ *Abolition of Man* and *Mere Christianity*, and (for a contemporary Eastern comparison) the Dalai Lama’s *Ethics for the New Millennium*. Recently we also read about the history of character education in American universities (from Julie Reuben’s *The Making of the Modern University*) and about practical character formation from a Christian perspective (from Dallas Willard’s *Renovation of the Heart*).

My syllabus describes the project in a paragraph:

Along with weekly online journals, each student does three detailed *inventories* of their own strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in being a good person (at the beginning, middle, and end of the term); each inventory includes both a first-person snapshot (“in my own eyes”)

and a third-person snapshot from a friend or family member (“in the eyes of another”). In addition, each student picks a cluster of virtues that they believe are relevant to being a good person, develops a plan for growing in these virtues over the course of the term, reports on their *experiences* of following the plan at the beginning, middle, and end of the term, culminating in an end-of-term report which includes a more detailed and empirically informed plan for growing in these and other virtues once they leave the course.

While the weekly journals are designed to prod regular reflection, the core of the project is the phased reporting:

	Beginning Report	Middle Report	Ending Report
Inventory: --in your own eyes --in the eyes of another			
Experience			

I explain to the students the basic idea of the “inventory”: just as a business stands to benefit from regularly taking an honest inventory of its assets, liabilities, income, and expenses, individuals stand to benefit from regularly taking an honest inventory of their moral beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. And just as businesses benefit from having both *internal* audits, done by them, and *external* audits, done by outside accounting firms, individuals benefit from having both a moral inventory of themselves “in their own eyes” and a moral inventory of themselves “in the eyes of another” whom they know and trust.

The beginning report asks students to answer the following questions “in their own eyes” in one medium-length (200-250 words) paragraph each:

1. Definition of “Good Person”: What attitudes, character traits, and patterns of behavior do you believe define a good person?
2. Moral Strengths: What attitudes, character traits, and patterns of behavior do you already possess that make it *more* likely that you will consistently succeed and/or grow in being a good person (as defined above)?

3. Moral Weaknesses: What attitudes, character traits, and patterns of behavior do you already possess that make it *less* likely that you will consistently succeed and/or grow in being a good person (as defined above)?
4. Moral Opportunities: What situations do you reasonably expect to encounter in the next six weeks that will give you excellent chances to succeed and/or grow in being a good person (as defined above)?
5. Moral Threats: What situations do you reasonably expect to encounter in the next six weeks that will present obstacles or challenges to succeeding and/or growing in being a good person (as defined above)?

The “in the eyes of another” asks students to recruit one of their friends or family members to answer (via email) appropriately re-worded versions of the above questions *about the student*. For example:

1. Definition of “Good Person”: What attitudes, character traits, and patterns of behavior do you think this individual believes defines a good person?
2. Moral Strengths: What attitudes, character traits, and patterns of behavior does this individual already possess that make it *more* likely that he or she will consistently succeed and/or grow in being a good person (as defined above)?

And so on. The middle and ending reports have almost identical “inventory” questions to the beginning report (I have the ending report forecast six *years* ahead, instead of six *weeks*). Students are required to adjust their answers as the semester unfolds. I let students pick the same or new people for each report’s “in the eyes of another” section so as not to require too much of a burden on a single chosen friend or family member.

So much for the “inventory.” I explain the “experience” dimension as follows:

The first reading we did in this class (“The Disparity Between Intellect and Character,” by Harvard psychiatrist Robert Coles) raised the question, “What is the point of knowing about what’s good unless you keep trying to become a good person?” Also, one of our authors (C. S. Lewis) said “No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good.” With these thoughts in mind, then, the “experience” dimension of this project involves conducting a sort of moral experiment upon yourself by trying very hard to be good in some

specific areas, and then keeping on trying to become a good person in those areas. How? By making a serious attempt to practice some cluster of four *virtues*. You get to pick which virtues to focus on. However, the four virtues you pick should be virtues that are among the virtues discussed in this class, and virtues that you do not already find yourself practicing easily. So, for example, if you are already a patient and kind person, but are not a very honest or courageous person, it would be better to focus on the virtues of honesty and courage for this project. The four virtues you pick can be non-religious virtues (for example, the famous “cardinal” virtues of courage, temperance, prudence, and justice), religious virtues (for example, the famous “theological” virtues of faith, hope, and love), or some combination of these (you may include virtues not even mentioned in this paragraph).

I explain that one rationale for picking virtues that they do not already find themselves practicing easily comes from what C. S. Lewis says about one influential Christian attitude towards the virtue of humility:

You may remember that the first step towards humility was to realize that one is proud. I want to add now that the next step is to make some serious attempt to practice the Christian virtues. A week is not enough. Things often go swimmingly for the first week. Try six weeks.¹

For the beginning report, I require students to answer the following questions for each of the four virtues they choose:

- What is this virtue you are picking to focus on? (Explain it.)
- Why are you picking this particular virtue to focus on?
- What is your plan for growing in this virtue?

Given these minimal instructions, students choose all kinds of virtues to practice. (In a recent semester, approximately 120 students chose 89 virtues, with courage, honesty, faith, love, and patience as the five most frequently chosen. See Appendix below for the list).

For the middle report, I reference the next part of the Lewis passage quoted above:

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 2009), p. 141.

By that time [i.e. by six weeks], having, as far as one can see, fallen back completely or even fallen lower than the point one began from, one will have discovered some truths about oneself. No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good. A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. After all, you find out the strength of the German army by fighting against it, not by giving in. You find out the strength of a wind by trying to talk against it, not by lying down. A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in. We never found out the strength of the evil impulse inside us until we try to fight it...²

And I ask students to answer the following questions:

- What specific steps did you take to make a serious attempt at practicing the virtues you chose?
- What situations gave you opportunities to practice the virtues you chose?
- What got in the way of your attempts to practice the virtues you chose?
- Were you relatively successful in practicing the virtues you chose?
- Why does your experience make you think C. S. Lewis was correct or incorrect in what he says (above) about trying “very hard to be good”?

The ending report asks students to write about their experience with virtue both retrospectively (looking back over the semester) and prospectively (looking forward over the next phase of their life). I frame this using the following passage from Dallas Willard, explaining that Willard “is writing as a Christian philosopher, of course, but what he says can be translated and/or adapted to other religious and non-religious frameworks as well”:

...as we look forward, now is the time for specific planning. Individually we must ask ourselves what are the particular things we need to do in order to bring the triumph of Christ’s life more fully into the various dimensions of our being. Are there areas where my will is not abandoned to God’s will or where old segments of fallen character

² Ibid., pp. 141-142.

remain unchallenged? Do some of my thoughts, images, or patterns of thinking show more of my kingdom or the kingdom of evil than they do God's kingdom—for example, as they relate to money, or social practices, or efforts to bring the world to Christ? Is my body still my master in some area? Am I its servant rather than it mine?³

I remind students that Willard here is echoing the six middle chapters of *Renovation of the Heart* (which they read) where he describes the way six different parts of the human being (thoughts, feelings, will/character, body, social dimension, and soul) can be transformed in the process of becoming a better person. I explain that the student's task is to “write a plan for how *you* as an individual can grow in these six areas over the next six years. You should follow Willard's *structure* in your discussion, though you are free to follow him closely, partially, or not at all in the *content* of your discussion.”

In my limited experience, both Christian and non-Christian students will identify themselves to me as such at the end of the semester before expressing appreciation for being assigned the tasks of cultivating and reflecting on virtues that they themselves get to select. Nevertheless, I am currently looking for ways to make the project more explicitly comparative; to neatly contrast (say) the six chapters of Willard's book with similarly structured approaches from contemporary non-Christian philosophers. If you have suggestions of how to do this—like I said at the outset—I am eager to learn from you.

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³ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), pp. 254-255.

Appendix:

This is an alphabetical list and tally of the 89 virtues approximately 120 students chose for themselves in the Spring of 2013. The five most frequently chosen were courage, honesty, faith, love, and patience. (Thanks to Miles Andrews, my philosophy Instructional Student Assistant, for tallying these.)

Acceptance: 1	Fortitude: 1	Rationality: 1
Ambition: 4	Friendship: 1	Relationships: 1
Anger-management: 1	Frugality: 2	Reliability: 1
Appreciation: 3	Generosity: 6	Respectfulness: 1
Assertiveness: 5	Gratitude: 5	Responsibility: 5
Bravery: 4	Happiness: 2	Reverence: 2
Caring: 1	Health: 3	Sacrifice: 2
Caution: 1	Honesty: 30	Self-awareness: 1
Charity: 3	Hope: 16	Self-control: 1
Chastity: 1	Humility: 12	Selflessness: 2
Cleanliness: 4	Independence: 1	Self-respect: 2
Confidence: 10	Integrity: 1	Self-sacrifice: 1
Contentment: 1	Joyfulness: 1	Spontaneity: 3
Commitment: 2	Justice: 4	Sincerity: 2
Common sense: 2	Kindness: 10	Strength: 1
Compassion: 4	Knowledge: 1	Stress-management: 1
Courage: 45	Love: 20	Supportiveness: 2
Creativity: 2	Loyalty: 1	Tact: 1
Decisiveness: 1	Moderation: 4	Temperance: 14
Determination: 3	Modesty: 1	Thoughtfulness: 1
Devotion: 1	Openness: 3	Thrift: 1
Diligence: 6	Orderliness: 1	Time-management: 4
Discipline: 3	Organization: 4	Tolerance: 1
Easygoing: 1	Outgoing: 1	Trust: 4
Empathy: 1	Patience: 50	Truth: 1
Entitlement: 1	Perseverance: 2	Trustworthiness: 3
Faith: 28	Persistence: 2	Understanding: 1
Flexibility: 4	Positivity: 2	Wisdom: 4
Focus: 3	Productivity: 5	
Forgiveness: 7	Prudence: 7	
	Punctuality: 1	