

Focus

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SOCIETY

Becoming moral by degrees

Education neither implies, includes, nor promises virtue

By Sheldon Krinsky

It is generally believed that a good education will get you two things. First, it will afford you an opportunity for a decent standard of living. That's the external reward.

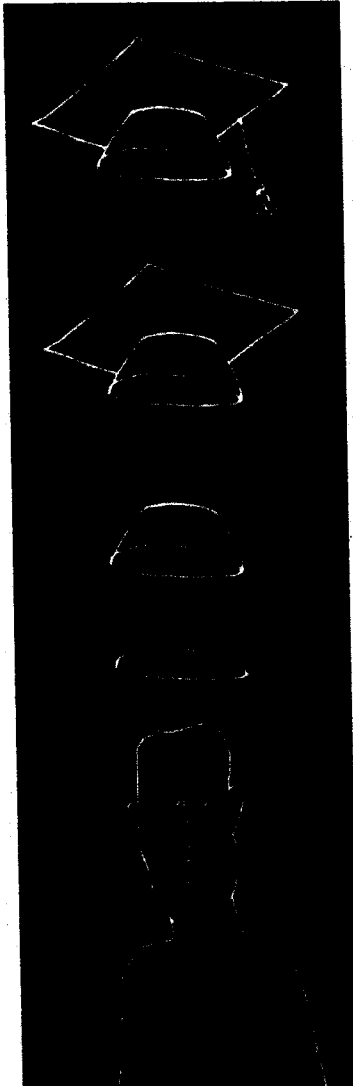
Second, it will provide you with gratification of an immeasurable sort. You will become self-realized, tuned into the artistic, literary, and scientific world around you. It may be the sense of wonderment in interpreting "Finnegans Wake"; or in deconstructing Beethoven's Fifth Symphony; or in finally understanding how the genetic apparatus uses the machinery of the cell to make proteins. But once you cross the knowledge threshold, there's no going back. The rewards are cumulative and sustaining.

None of this is surprising, or controversial — but it ignores a far more difficult but important question:

Is education a path to virtue? Does it foster moral excellence and integrity? Does more education make us more virtuous human beings?

I can already surmise the varied responses to this question: "Yes!" "No!" "How sophomoric!" "How elitist!" Agreement there's not.

Questions about the link between education and virtue take us back to our intellectual forebears. Some 2,500 years ago the Greek



philosopher Plato placed virtue at the top of the educational pyramid. After students mastered language, science, and mathematics, they were ready to reach the highest state of knowledge, moral virtue.

Plato considered virtue to be knowledge that can be taught. Little did he know, but he started a debate that has persisted for thousands of years.

His equally eminent student, Aristotle, believed that virtue came from forming good habits and that it was not an issue of enlightenment through knowledge. Maybe education provides reinforcement for moral behavior but it will not create virtue.

Faced with the existence of racism, sexism, and homophobia among some segments of the student body in higher education, one is inclined to side with Aristotle on this issue.

True, some people can become morally transformed from what they read and study, but we really cannot explain why it affects some and not others.

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'Knowledge' is not 'virtue'

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Here is a personal story:

While I was still an impressionable undergraduate, I took a course in ethics — quite a departure from my science curriculum. We studied the ethics of Immanuel Kant, the great German philosopher. Like any important work, it required some effort, but one experience showed me clearly the bridge between moral virtue and education.

I was planning to attend an outdoor production of "Merchant of Venice" in Central Park. Tickets were allocated based on the principle "first come, first served," whether you lived on Park Avenue or Brownsville. You got your ticket by your place in line. And the line seemed interminable.

When I was about midway to the front, a friend called out my name and motioned for me to sneak in with him. Out of the blue, I was facing the sure prospect of a decent seat, but at the cost of violating one of Kant's moral principles.

I tried hard to figure out a way to "universalize" my behavior (a moral requirement for Kant) without corrupting the entire system of fairness upon which the public concert was grounded. But try as I might, I could not. So I declined my friend's offer, stayed put, and ended up with a poor seat. In return, I bathed myself in moral virtue.

This small episode represented one of those moments when education — in this case, meeting Kant — afforded me a useful moral framework. Writ large, such a framework has vast potential. It is hard not to conclude that had German society paid attention to Kant, the Nazi machine would never have retained power and the Holocaust would never have happened.

If virtue correlates with education, then there are certain practices of the educated elite that confound me. For example, there's a practice in health sciences research of ghost authorship. A pharmaceutical company would

like to have a favorable editorial or review paper written and published about one of its products. It contracts with a company to write the piece.

The company then locates a prominent, well-respected specialist in the field, usually at an academic institution, to sign his or her name to the article and send it in for publication. Once published, the ghost writer gets paid, the contract company gets its fee, the drug company gets what it wants — a favorable review or editorial — the academic scientist gets a nice cut, and no one knows that the article is fundamentally plagiarized.

There is no law against this, although not all journals would permit this type of submission if they knew it occurred. There's also the practice of leading scientists putting their names on articles their students did all the work on.

Surely, the same practice would not be permitted if carried out by students in the institution of the complicit scientist. Rather, we would condemn them and call the behavior by its proper name, "plagiarism."

Are more educated people likely to lie less? to express more humanitarian values? to be more beneficent to others? to show more empathy? or to make complex moral decisions? I don't think so. At least not in this country.

Maybe Plato was right and we do not know how to teach virtue. Or maybe Aristotle had the right idea and it has to be practiced. Someone told me that in Beijing you can leave your suitcase on a busy street for an hour or more and it will be there when you get back. If that's true, it probably has nothing to do with formal education, but rather social education that arises from shared, deeply embedded cultural practices.

There is no question that,

whatever virtue is, it goes beyond the mere benefits of knowledge, namely self-realization and aggrandizement of material wealth.

Virtue means that you have to consider your contributions beyond yourself. It starts with respect for the dignity of other people and the appraisal of your actions on others. It is also something you can cultivate over many years of honest work and integrity and lose in an instant.

Just think of those scientists who committed one foolish act of misconduct to gain prestige. Think of the scientist who agreed

to delay publication of the results of his industry-funded study of a pesticide's toxicity until the sponsoring company received federal approval for marketing the pesticide. Thousands of pesticide workers became infertile until the pesticide was removed from the market decades later.

If there is no correlation between education and virtue, this has implications for public decision making. There is no reason to embrace a moral meritocracy on the basis of academic achievements.

Because higher education does not ensure a life of moral integrity, people in all socioeconomic levels have equal standing with regard to ethical decisions. The way that the intellectual elites circumvent this is to hide the values in complex technical decisions. They present the decisions as value-neutral.

One of life's challenges is to figure all this out, and act on what you learn. And when you can figure out how these hidden values are linked to acts of injustice, and you act on it, then you will be fulfilling your responsibility as a virtuous person. It is an education worth having.

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