

THE FAMILY AS MORAL CENTER

An Evolutionary Hermeneutic of Virtue in Family Studies

James J. Ponzetti, Jr.

University of British Columbia

Moral development fosters virtue, character, and a sensitivity to know when and how to act. Families serve as crucibles for moral development. They are expected to develop moral strength in their members by instilling virtuous character, but what does this mean for contemporary families? The purpose of this paper is to promote the use of virtue ethics as a means of moral education in family life. A definition of virtue and virtue ethics is presented in order to clarify the meaning of these concepts. An evolutionary hermeneutic is then presented as a basis for considering the cardinal virtues as basic content for moral education in the family context.

The social nature of human existence is expressed through ongoing interpersonal interaction. The need to belong provides a powerful motivation for individuals to nurture close connections with others such as those evident in family relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000). Yet, people are not inherently competent in establishing relationships. They must learn how to interact with others, and how to develop and maintain relationships (Saunders, 1990; Thompson, 1988). Intimate relationships necessitate the recognition of rights and responsibilities that must be protected and reg-

ulated for people to live together in harmony. However, for people to act in a manner that respects these rights and responsibilities requires the development of moral sense. Moral development fosters virtue, character, and a sensitivity to know when and how to act (Walker & Pitts, 1998). Moral action is thus the concrete manifestation of virtue and character. The traits or qualities that make it possible for people to live well among others are constitutive of virtue.

Virtue is part of the fabric of everyday life. It is woven into the entire web of moment-by-moment living. The "topography

• **James J. Ponzetti, Jr.**, PhD, DMin., CFLE, CCFE, School of Social Work and Family Studies, University of British Columbia, 2080 West Mall, Vancouver, B. C. V6T 1Z2, Canada, Phone: 604-822-3778; fax: 604-822-8656, email: ponzetti@interchange.ubc.ca

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of the moral ecology” in which humans exist is directed at efforts to discover and live the good life; that is, a healthy, socially useful and fully developed life. The values and goods inherent in this moral ecology present reasons for moral action (Brinkmann, 2004). Yet, the key question is how people realize such a life. Although most individuals have figuratively been given lists of acts that they should never do, they receive little guidance about whom they should be or how they should act to become better people. Families are expected to convey this knowledge; that is, the domestic sphere is one of the most influential domains in which individuals learn (or fail to learn) to be moral.

The family as moral center is a particularly apt metaphor because it provides a fundamental environment in which the moral potential of children can be cultivated. Most children reside and mature in familial settings where the sense of virtue and formation of character reinforces the moral lifestyles essential for a civil society. Such instruction must begin in early childhood and be reinforced consistently over time. This idea is not new. Hauerwas (1985) also referred to families as “schools of character.” Virtue and character are nurtured in a formative community like the family rather than deduced through autonomous reasoning (Sandage & Hill, 2001). Thus, families serve as crucibles for moral development.

Virtue refers to a disposition to lead a good life by identifying choices and behavior that promote human well-being. It provides standards for conduct that makes life go well for people. Virtue is not only necessary for proper actions but also indicative of good character. Hence, virtuous people not only make better citizens but the best family members, because they are capable of not letting their own wishes lead to actions that are detrimental to family members, other individuals, or their community.

Virtues are widely regarded by the general public as important aspects of interpersonal relationships, even though scholars in the empirical sciences have not accorded them prominent attention (Fowers & Tjeltveit,

2003). The emergence of positive psychology (Sandage & Hill, 2001; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Synder & McCullough, 2000) and character education (Howard, Berkowitz, & Schaeffer, 2004; Null & Milson, 2003) are examples of contemporary scholarship that considers the role of virtue for individuals in modern times. However, virtue in relational contexts such as families has been given sparse attention by family researchers. To complicate matters further, there is variability and controversy among those who recognize the salience of virtue as to which virtues should be investigated or espoused.

EVOLUTIONARY HERMENEUTICS

Although sundry social scientists have put forth proposals for clarifying virtue, they have not always adequately tapped the rich resources that lead to a more robust understanding. Hermeneutics offer a different approach to the task of understanding human living from typical social scientific accounts. It is directed toward explaining and interpreting concepts that make comprehension possible. An evolutionary hermeneutic offers a unique contribution by perusing collective human knowledge acquired over time for guidance in response to modern concerns and issues. As described by Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde (1990), evolutionary hermeneutics serve as “a corrective against the naive assumption that present knowledge is in all respects superior to that of the past and that it is safe to ignore the cultural adaptations that were positively selected over time” (p. 25). It offers a useful way of reintroducing virtue in the lexicon of the social and behavioral sciences because the persistence of virtues in various disciplines for centuries has suggested its viability as a teaching about the interpersonal life.

Evolutionary hermeneutics considers the insight available in previous knowledge on its own merits rather than discounting it in light of contemporary understanding. Two assumptions are fundamental to evolutionary herme-

neutics. The first simply holds that concepts “that have been used for many centuries under very different social and historical conditions are likely to have adaptive value for human-kind” (p. 25). The second assumption is that in order “to understand the significance of such concepts, it is advantageous to compare their meanings across time, in order to identify invariant components as well as possible variations in response to differing conditions in the surrounding cultural environment” (p. 25). From the perspective of evolutionary hermeneutics, the central tenet of the present paper is that the historic tenacity of the cardinal virtues constitutes a fundamental orientation that defines the focus of moral education in contemporary families.

The purpose of this article is to promote the use of virtue ethics as a means of education for family life. A definition of virtue and virtue ethics is initially presented in order to clarify any misinterpretations regarding the meaning of these concepts. Then, using evolutionary hermeneutics as the basis for consideration, the cardinal virtues are discussed as integral directives for optimal family functioning.

DEFINING VIRTUE

Important to the purpose of this article is a clear understanding of what virtue means and how it can be cultivated in families. The study of virtue has a long complex history. Hundreds of articles and books have analyzed the meaning of virtue, its Greek origins, its combination with Christian morality, intricate history through medieval European philosophy and theology, and reworking in post-Enlightenment Europe and North America (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Virtue is not a novel concept, but it has fallen out of vogue in modern times. It sounds old-fashioned and has come to connote a judgmental self-righteousness that contemporary individuals, especially intellectuals, eschew. Many scholars perceive concepts such as virtue, good, and moral in religious or dogmatic

terms, with consequent associations of good or bad, righteous versus sinful. It is difficult to discuss virtue in a moderate or dispassionate way (Baumeister & Exline, 1999; Fowers, 1998).

Virtue is reflected in the full range of human experience. It incorporates emotion, cognition, as well as behavior. Virtue has been described as personal habits, moral traits, character strengths, dispositions or inclinations to feel, think, and act in a right manner. Virtue is thus not only necessary for proper behavior, but constitutive of good thoughts and feelings. It is the emotional desire and willful intention to act well. Virtue, once internalized, promotes the habitual practice of moral actions (Holmes, 1991).

Virtue must not be construed as the imposition of anachronistic rules or strict moral codes. In fact, virtue can be contrasted with principles or procedures. Unlike the deontological approach, which implies that a moral person primarily needs to know and follow a prescribed list of rules to behave virtuously, virtues refers to the moral dispositions or capacity of people to perceive needs accurately and respond accordingly. So, rules and principles are derived from virtues; they are directives that obtain their context from the virtuous activity. A virtuous person is one who employs personal inclinations and character traits to do the moral thing, make the right choice, without necessarily asking how specific rules apply to the situation. The moral life is not simply defined by what people do because people are never just acting. Rather, they are always becoming better or worse people (Gould, 2002; Martone, 1998). It provides the standard for right conduct in interpersonal contexts and guides individuals toward healthy relationships.

The development of virtue is ambitious, especially when it confronts people with the painful reality of their imperfection, but virtuous striving can yield a more commendable life. Virtue is learned by observing and doing, by being aware of the reasons why a certain kind of action came about and of the reasons

for it. In understanding virtue and moral education, the central challenge is to comprehend how people manage to override egoistic desires and do what is exemplary instead. Marriage and family life is presented as the context and evolutionary hermeneutics offer the methodology for consideration of virtue ethics as a means of confronting this challenge.

VIRTUE ETHICS AND FAMILY STUDIES

Scholarship in the empirical sciences has not emphasized virtue as an important construct. Perhaps the perception that scientific investigation must be value-free has hampered the study of morality and virtue (Fowers & Tjeltveit, 2003). However, virtue ethics offers a comprehensive approach for teaching moral living that attends to the development of the whole person within the social context he or she resides. It bridges the gap between abstract ethical theory and the moral demands implicit in everyday mundane situations (Gould, 2002; Martone, 1998; Van Hooft, 2001).

Family scholars and practitioners tend to focus on behaviors that support healthy relationships rather than the feelings or thoughts that reinforce these behaviors. For example, they may teach communication skills or investigate how to resolve conflicts rather than specific cognitions or emotions that may promote the use of such skills. Notwithstanding learning constructive skills and techniques may implicitly teach values and promote virtue, this focus on skills *training* instead of virtue *education* may limit the applicability of similar skills in different situations. In other words, focusing on technical competence, although useful to a point, may not generalize across diverse contexts. Espousing virtue education endorses consideration of the whole person—thoughts, feelings, and behaviors—in context and, in so doing, educates rather than trains the person. In other words, if individuals are instructed and guided to internalize a virtuous disposition, then the emotions and thoughts

that comprise this disposition facilitate moral action, even in circumstances in which specific skills were not learned. To be succinct, virtue ethics builds character in ways that skills training cannot.

Virtue ethics is particularly well suited in its application to family life and the socialization of virtuous children. From a virtue ethics perspective, virtue is learned incrementally by observing others within a social context and not simply by following a set of abstract principles or procedures. It recognizes that the contextual nature of moral decisions places this decision making in the midst of everyday living, which is always relational (Martone, 1998). The family context presents a unique setting for daily intimate interaction that can facilitate moral growth.

Families are instrumental in educating their members concerning the desired actions necessary for interpersonal relations. Yet, despite the important role families have in the socialization process, they have received only modest attention as a context for moral development (Okin & Reich, 1999; Walker, 1999). The social delegation of socialization and education functions does not assure virtuous conduct. The actual practice of virtue within intense and sometimes volatile family relationships results from a myriad of complex processes that are inhibited by vice which families also struggle with and often ignorantly promote. Families are at least partially responsible for the presence of both virtue and vice.

The everyday existence of family members requires virtue to adjudicate competing interests or conflicting goals when they arise. Virtue is expressed in moral behaviors consistent with healthy interpersonal interaction. The most enduring way to develop moral strength is to inculcate virtuous character.

Moral growth occurs as a consequence of learning how to be with others, how to behave in this world; it is learning prompted by taking to heart family experience. Families can offer opportunities for adults and children to grow as they share their lives through ongoing cooperative activities directed toward moral goods.

But what virtues should families exemplify and teach? One response to this question is provided through the consideration of the cardinal or principal virtues.

CARDINAL VIRTUES AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

In various cultures and societies around the world, the same virtues appear repeatedly, suggesting similar responses to the conundrum of individuals living together. Although each family is unique, certain common virtues have been identified and repeated as especially important throughout history. Granted many lists of virtues have been compiled; however, particular virtues have been labeled *cardinal* because the tenacity of such common virtues attests to their import in facilitating optimal human interaction. These virtues, using an evolutionary hermeneutics orientation, command particular attention. The cardinal virtues are recognized as instrumental in enabling people to overcome selfish impulses and live together in harmony.

Four cardinal virtues have been espoused since the time of Plato and Aristotle. The writings of classical and medieval writers, such as Thomas Aquinas, continued to promote these virtues as constitutive of good character. The ubiquity of these virtues across time supported their core importance in defining the fundamental aspirations of human beings. Thus, it is reasonable through the lens of an evolutionary hermeneutic, to consider the cardinal virtues as a curriculum of sorts for living in contemporary families. The exposition of the cardinal virtues through word and deed within the family context can emphasize and reinforce the fundamental place these virtues hold in human history.

The four cardinal virtues are justice, prudence, temperance, and fortitude. These virtues, once internalized in the socialization process, can be used conscientiously to empower and dispose one to act in ways indicative of human flourishing. The cardinal vir-

tues perform a heuristic function in that these virtues express what minimally constitutes a virtuous person. They do not purport to exhaust the entire domain of virtue. Rather than being the last word on virtue, they are among the first, providing the bare essentials. The cardinal virtues have been considered pivotal character strengths that enable human beings to perform good actions easily and well. The cardinal virtues provide a framework for what people should fundamentally be and at what human action should basically aim. All other virtues hang on moral action in response to rightly integrated dispositions. These virtues are necessary for the possession of every other virtue (Oderberg, 1999).

The cardinal virtues of justice, prudence, temperance, and fortitude stand in relation to each other. The presence of one cardinal virtue presumes the presence of the other three (Harrison, 1992; Porter, 1993; Terkel & Duval, 1999). Werpehowski (1986), for example, noted, "Justice requires for its effective realization the power to discern the right means to secure the good toward which justice disposes (prudence), the ability to order the passions for single-minded pursuit of the good (temperance), and steadfastness in the pursuit even in face of threats to the self (fortitude)" (p. 330).

Justice

Of the four cardinal virtues, justice has garnered the most attention. It refers to the will to render to others what is due. The practice of justice brings the will under the guidance of reason instead of egoistic, self-seeking inclinations. It attends to what people receive and give in their association with others (Werpehowski, 1986). Intimate relationships involve both distributive and procedural justice. Distributive justice refers to the issue of resource distribution. Procedural justice considers how allocation decisions are made (Kidder, Fagan, & Cohn, 1981).

Distributive justice is often associated with equality. Equality dictates the same treatment for everyone regardless of contributions.

Often a child's earliest moral insight occurs when the child witnesses an unequal distribution of some thing and remarks, "That's unfair." The fact that the child can recognize that inequality is unfair does not mean the child knows what equality is. But the child does recognize that equality generally governs participation in groups. There are however two other means of distribution; namely, need and equity (Deutsch, 1975).

Distributive justice based on need concerns deprivation and distress as well as the provision of resources adequate to meet these needs. Equity is predicated on proportionality rather than equality. In other words, those who contribute much should receive much whereas those who contribute less should receive less. A relationship is deemed inequitable or unjust when a partner who contributes more receives less or vice versa. Extensive literature has considered the role of equity in relationships (Sprecher, 1995; Winters, 2003). Given the economic orientation of modern societies, it is not surprising that social science research has focused on equity rather than equality. However, it may be too limited a perspective because questions of justice may arise in non-economic relationships, such as marriage, that are decided in terms unrelated to equity (Deutsch, 1975).

Equality is regarded as the appropriate form of justice in intimate settings because it promotes cooperation rather than competition (Sampson, 1975). Egalitarian relationships are most likely to occur when the individuals involved in the relationship have access to a wide range of equally valuable resources. However, the intergenerational nature of families makes egalitarian relationships unlikely because children and adults do not possess equal access. Further, sex differences can undermine equal access to resources for spouses. Accordingly, males tend to view justice in terms of equity whereas women use equality (Kidder et al., 1981). Certainly, social roles and relational power influence procedural justice.

Marriage, through all its vicissitudes, disagreements, and changes, is usually portrayed as an amorous and romantic experience. As an intense emotional experience, it is not readily associated with justice, which is anchored to more rational moorings. Nonetheless, Klinge (1998) made an eloquent case for using justice rather than romantic love as the dominant image in marriage. Only when the power differences based on sex are recognized and resolved, both within the family and the larger social milieu, can the virtue of justice be realized in marriage and family life.

Prudence

Prudence is perhaps the most often overlooked of the cardinal virtues. The word prudence is so burdened with history that it is inevitably subject to misunderstanding. Moreover, it has all but disappeared from contemporary vocabulary. This does not mean, however, that people are no longer in need of it. Prudence involves wisdom, foresightedness, or mindfulness. It is the ability to discern what is good and then act appropriately. It is in this respect that prudence is the precondition for all the other virtues; without it, people cannot know what use to make of the other virtues or how to attain the good that they seek to attain. Merely wanting justice does not make one just, nor does seeking temperance make one disciplined: discernment and decisiveness are also required. The pursuit of prudence and the development of the other virtues constitute an essential collaboration.

Prudence serves as a guide in every facet of everyday life. The exercise of prudence employs reason to maintain a sense of objectivity about self and relationship. This perspective assists in recognizing perceptions that may be narcissistically distorted by desires, fears, or other powerful emotions (Jeffries, 2000). Prudence is remarkably difficult to develop, for it is concerned not only with knowing what is virtuous but reflecting on the relational context in order to discern proper decisions. Pru-

dence is, thus, a critical virtue in moral education (Martone, 1998).

Marital couples and families inevitably experience unexpected burdens and responsibilities that require prudence to overcome and resolve (Anderson, 1999). Thinking about parenting is helpful for understanding prudence. Parents exercise this virtue whenever they advise their children about how to accomplish new tasks or make friends. Even though children cry “foul” or “that’s unfair” whenever parents treat them differently from one another, prudence enables parents to appreciate and care for their children while recognizing the special character within each child. The eminent sociologist Elise Boulding (1981) insightfully noted that she was unaware

of any other social group where individual differences are celebrated as much as in the family. That is, parents talk very proudly about how different Johnny is from Jane. Every family has its stories: Johnny slept the night through right from birth but Jane always slept lightly at night, never took daytime naps after she was three months old. It is never trivial, and it continues through childhood. What parents are doing is identifying what is unique in each child and they are continually telling them about it. (p. 37)

Respecting the uniqueness of each family member is the concern of prudence because family members must be vigilant about the implications of their actions in an immediate sense as well as for future interaction.

Prudence does not involve anxiety or fear. It assumes courage or fortitude: without fortitude prudence amounts to pusillanimity, just as without prudence fortitude amounts to recklessness or folly.

Fortitude

Contemporary terms for fortitude include courage, steadfastness, and strength. Fortitude fosters the willingness to face adversity and endure hardships, whether expected or not, that arise within the family itself (e.g., loss of a

job) or threats to the family from external sources (e.g., neighborhood violence). Fortitude in relationships involves patience and sacrifice from individuals with different needs, wants, abilities, and gifts (Jeffries, 2000).

Perseverance is necessary when family members realize that the good of the family require sacrifice. The significance of sacrifice in intimate relationships, such as families, has been underscored (Bahr & Bahr, 2001; Whitton, Stanley, & Markman, 2002). Family members must recognize that sacrifice is not about giving up but about giving over personal freedom to the greater good of the family. Fortitude is essential when it becomes clear that a family member must forgo something or some behavior because it is deemed harmful to the family. For example, it is very hard for an abuser to learn new ways of interacting even though he has come to recognize the harmfulness of his behavior. Patience and steadfastness on the abuser’s part, and the support and encouragement of family members often demands phenomenal fortitude. However, in some cases, the other virtues, especially prudence and justice, may direct a contrary course of action such as the termination of the abusive relationship. Either option presents a significant hardship that requires fortitude.

Temperance

Temperance, though not as lofty as the other cardinal virtues, probably surpasses them in terms of difficulty. Temperance entails moderation, restraint, discipline, and self-control. Baumeister and Exline (1999) conceptualized self-control as the primary moral muscle in personality because it mediates the expression of all behavior directed at other individuals. In this sense they are correct in situating self-control as the locus of the virtuous character. However, as mentioned previously, the presence of self-control or temperance presupposes the presence of the other cardinal virtues. Thus, the coexistence of the four cardinal virtues is essential to apprehend the recurring prominence they have had in moral philosophy.

phy. Since families have multiple demands that cannot all be realized, temperance is necessary. Research evidence is clear that family members whose actions exhibit self-control, restraint, or moderation experience more positive outcomes (Jeffries, 2000; Strom, 2003).

Humility and fidelity are characteristic expressions of temperance in relationships. Humility involves a recognition of personal limitations and the willingness to defer to others when reason dictates that one should do so (Jeffries, 2000; Strom, 2003; Tangney, 2000). Keenan (1995) proposed fidelity as a contemporary cardinal virtue. Fidelity means making promises, honoring commitments, maintaining trust, and renegotiating as needs, desires, and conditions change. Hauerwas (1985) described fidelity as central to the family as a school for character. It makes durability and hope possible within family relationships.

Marriage and family living are based on humble acts that represent a willingness to share ordinary life, and find meaning in routine, familiar, unromantic tasks: earning a living, putting out the garbage, feeding the baby in the middle of the night. Family connections depend on finding the value in simple and common things, rather than demand an extraordinary intensity in everything. It represents the discovery of the extraordinary in the midst of the mundane activities of daily life. From an evolutionary hermeneutic perspective, the cardinal virtues of justice, prudence, fortitude, and temperance offer a historically relevant framework for contemporary marriage and family life to use in realizing not only what the virtuous life entails but also how to provide moral education to its members.

CONCLUSION

In this article, a framework for understanding the cardinal virtues as central to modern family life is presented. Both children and adults learn about sharing, about forgiveness, about dependence and independence, about personal responsibility and loyalty to others through

experience. The rhythms and bonding encountered and nurtured in families early on provides a basis for future life patterns. Whether children grow up anxious or confident, trusting or suspicious, ambitious or contented, is significantly impacted by their early experiences of family life. In establishing new families as adults, people can let this aspect of interaction run its own course, sometimes leading to dysfunction; or they can volitionally attend to creating a lifestyle indicative of the good life.

Individuals acquire their attitudes and ways of living from their families. Indeed, parents are the first, and possibly most profound, teachers of their children. They are instrumental in modeling the compassion and care that emanate from virtue ethics (Hesch, 1992; Noddings, 1984). The involvement of families in moral education has become more poignant because modern societies have created an environment that is especially inhospitable to virtue. An ideology of individualism and new economic patterns has categorized many self-interested actions as morally good. Further, shifting expectations of marital and family relationships have weakened the social and moral forces that deter immoral behavior. Such changes undermine conventional moral directives concerning how far individuals should yield when selfish inclinations conflict with group needs for stable, harmonious relationships. Parents are indispensable in nurturing a sense of connectedness to others despite the presence of what James Garbarino (1995) has adeptly called a "socially toxic environment."

Families are schools of virtue in their role as one of the most formative environments for the individuals who comprise them. Unless the adult interactions experienced by children are characterized by justice and mutuality, rather than domination and resignation, and unless family members are treated with respect and care, they are likely to be considerably hindered in becoming citizens of virtuous character. Unless they learn how to use prudence or wisdom when faced with the multiplicity of

conflicting options and opportunities, and make temperate or disciplined decisions in light of the impact such decisions may have on those around them, they are likely to be disappointed in their intimate lives. And unless they have the fortitude or perseverance to holdfast during times of trial and disappointment, they are not likely to navigate the daily challenges of family life successfully. Rather, than being one among many coequal social institutions, marital and family life directed by virtue ethics is its essential foundation.

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