



THE NECESSITY OF VIRTUE

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In this long, dark winter in the first year of the illegitimate reign of Joseph the Senile, we are confronted simultaneously with an acute culture war, a destructive cancel culture, and a degree of foolish political "wokism" unlike anything in modern history.

Politics is done by edict, troops surround the Capitol, and the dissenters are dismissed and deplatformed in what neo-Marxist Herbert Marcuse referred to as "repressive tolerance."

At the core of this pretend politics is a strict and absolute adherence to the "correctness" of the new slogans, untruths, and blatant virtue-signaling the Democrats use to advertise their own moral positioning for the purpose of self-promotion and domination.

Yet recall the major virtues of the Western tradition—the pagan virtues of courage, justice, temperance, and prudence and the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity) so unlike the Left's current fake smoke signals.

Nothing could be more different from virtue than virtue-signaling.

Remember as well, four plus three equals the Seven Virtues, a combination most thoroughly analyzed by St. Thomas Aquinas : the four virtues of the polis and the three virtues of the monastery.

It is not absurd to connect the four pagan virtues with Socrates and the three theological virtues with Jesus—the two great models upon which, until recently, we based our tradition of moral excellence. Socrates epitomized the philosophy of Athens and Jesus the theology of Jerusalem.

Charismatic figures, both men were masters who left no written teachings and founded no schools but who simply set an example.

In the efforts of their disciples and the passionate narratives inspired by their deaths, we see the beginnings of the inward vocabulary which, until recently at least, was the encoded recognition of our entire moral, philosophical, and theological idiom.

Discipleship of these two great and historic examples became a bulwark, fundamental to the entirety of Western morality.

All that is being swept away, as if it never existed. Gone . . .

The classicist George Steiner offers us in his many books—most notably, *Lessons of the Masters*—a sustained reflection on the infinitely complex and subtle interplay of power, trust, and passions in the most profound sorts of pedagogy.

Steiner considers a diverse array of traditions and disciples, returning throughout to three underlying themes—the master's power to exploit his student's dependence and vulnerability, the complementary threat of subversion and betrayal of the mentor by his pupil; and, the reciprocal exchange of trust and love, and of learning and instruction, between teacher and disciple.

Can we relearn what has been lost or forgotten? Can we possibly rediscover true virtue in a period of dangerous tumult and pure hatred? Are we adrift in a sea of moral relativism or worse, complete nihilism?

Virtue and the moral life must be founded on something. They are always grounded. They are not relative or subjective, as we have come to think of most preferences in the last two centuries.

For thousands of years and in many different religious and philosophical traditions, some concept of transcendence has been the fulcrum for the development of virtues that in these past eras sustained human flourishing.

Can it be so again? Or are we being deprogrammed to exclude any notion of dialogue, logic, and reason? Have we entered a new totalitarian era, a great "reset" as the Davosians refer to it, where only one line of thinking is acceptable?

If you visit the great cathedrals in Europe (perhaps frowned upon these days), you would be convinced of a higher purpose as you stared at the arches leaping into the heavens and took in the liturgies and artwork of faith. I have been to many of these places and in almost all have seen some profound visual

depiction of virtue.

It is decidedly not part of the ruling Biden ideology or the CNN mindset.

Instead, these depictions typically follow an iconographic program inspired by the once prevailing scholastic thought, with reliefs representing the human activities related to the virtues of *necessitas* (civil life, supreme sciences, intellectual speculation); the mythical inventions of the arts (painting, sculpture, and architecture); liberal arts, grammar, dialectic, rhetoric, and arithmetic, medicine, geometry, and astronomy; the divine virtues (faith, hope, and charity); and the cardinal virtues (wisdom, justice, temperance, and courage).

Today all these are getting wiped away—forgotten or worse, castigated to the waste bin of history and cursed as racist or fascistic.

We urgently need to reestablish a discussion of all these modes of thought and modern virtues to recover what has been lost and to shine a light that could actually illumine our future. "Truth dies in darkness," as the aphorism goes.

Tradition emphasized character over rules or consequences as the key element or driver of ethical thinking. In the West, virtue ethics was the prevailing approach to ethical thinking in the ancient and medieval periods. The tradition suffered a complete eclipse during the early modern period as Aristotelianism fell out of favor.

Virtue ethics returned to some prominence in philosophical thought during the mid-20th century, and is one of three dominant approaches to normative ethics,

the other two being deontology (the study of obligation and duty) and consequentialism (the theory that moral thinking is entirely about the costs and benefits of our actions).

Although concern for virtue appears in several different philosophical traditions, from the Chinese Confucian to other Eastern examples, in the West the roots of the tradition lie in the works of Plato and Aristotle. The tradition's key concepts derive from ancient Greek philosophy.

These concepts include *arête* (excellence), *phronesis* (practical or moral wisdom), and *eudaimonia* (flourishing, sometimes translated as happiness). Can we revive them?

The term itself, "virtue ethics," is actually of fairly recent vintage. It has come to be something of an umbrella term that encompasses a number of different theories. Initially, virtue ethics was characterized as a movement focusing on the central role of character imbued by virtue (which means "moral excellence" in Latin) in moral philosophy.

In the darkest hours, sometimes the human will can bend back to its best frame of reference—to that which has carried it down the centuries and sustained all human flourishing. This is such a time and more than ever we need a pause and a turn, a complete about-face, so as to rediscover and practice the original and best virtues.

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The [featured image](#) shows, "The Seven Virtues," by Francesco Pesellino and his workshop, painted ca. 1450.

