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Do "values" mean anything at all? Implications for law, education and society

Abstract

The term "values" is ubiquitous in modern discourse. It is held by many to embody high and noble aspirations that can be shared meaningfully. Often preferred to other terms, such as "virtues", however, values can be seen as creating an illusion of moral meaning rather than conveying something substantive and worthy of pursuit. This paper reviews scholarship that examines the term "values," particularly in relation to law and education , and suggests that the term is one that obfuscates rather than furthers clarity of meaning and that does, in fact, tend in a subjective and individualistic direction contrary to the best interests of citizenship in a free and democratic society. The article argues that the concept of "values" itself, and programmes relating to such things as "values clarification" should not form the basis of education in and for a free and democratic society. An understanding of the nature and history of "virtues" as a tool for public education is argued for, and an extensive bibliography on "values" and "virtues" included.

Opsomming

Beteken 'waardes' hoegenaamd iets? Implikasies vir die reg, die onderwys en die samelewing

Die term "waardes" is alomteenwoordig in moderne redevoering. Dit word deur baie beskou as synde hoë en edele aspirasies te beliggaam wat betekenisvol gedeel kan word. Alhoewel dit dikwels bo ander terme soos "deugde" verkies word, kan waardes egter beskou word as iets wat 'n illusie van morele betekenis skep, eerder as om iets wesentlik oor te dra en die moeite werd is om na te streef. Hierdie artikel lewer 'n oorsig oor vakkundigheid wat die term "waardes" ondersoek, veral in verband met die reg en onderwys, en gee te kenne dat die term benewel eerder as om duidelikheid van betekenis te bevorder en inderwaarheid in 'n subjektiewe en individualistiese rigting neig, in stryd met die beste belange van burgerskap in 'n vrye en demokratiese samelewing. Die artikel voer aan dat die konsep "waardes" op sigself en programme wat verband hou met sulke dinge soos "waardeverheldering", nie die grondslag van onderwys moet vorm in en vir 'n vrye en demokratiese samelewing nie. 'n Begrip van die aard en geskiedenis van "deugde" as 'n instrument vir openbare onderwys word voorgestaan en 'n uitgebreide bibliografie oor "waardes" en "deugde" word ingesluit.

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1.   Introduction and summary

We often speak about what matters most to us as involving our most cherished "values". Some say that we need more "values" education in schools. Others say that education should be, as far as possible, "values neutral". But what do we mean by the term "values" and does it really contribute much to our social and educational endeavors at all?

This article[1] will argue that the term "values" tends to confuse rather than further moral discussions and is, as a result, of limited use. It will be argued that a richer language for shared moral reasoning, one consistent with a rich understanding of both tolerance and pluralism, is found within the language of "virtue". The distinction between "values" and "virtues" is highly significant for all aspects of contemporary culture and that the widespread failure to understand what "values language" entails, poses a serious challenge to education and Western societies themselves.

The seriousness of the problem is touched upon in a work that traces the origins of "values" language in Nietzsche's thought. Professor Edward Andrew of the University of Toronto notes that: "… there has been only partial awareness [in the Western academy] that the language of values entails that nothing is intrinsically good and nobody is intrinsically worthy".[2]

If this is accurate, and I shall argue that it is, it will come as something of a shock to those who use the term "values", thinking they mean something "real" by it, when they realize that for many people the purpose of the term is to make what is, essentially, a purely personal statement that is irrelevant to the world beyond themselves. Thus, the modern axiom that "you have your values and I have mine" is the primary aspect of "values" used in the purely personal sense. A person who means by "values" something that they believe is objectively the case (or real, actual or factual) is, on this reading, simply confused or making a claim which "the language of values" can be said to deny by virtue of the fact that values are personal rather than objectively true.

The language that used to frame the moral and character language of the west was, in fact, the language of "virtues" not "values". The shift has not been noticed in most cases. Thus, politicians, theologians and educators have been slow to identify the problems posed by a shift from virtue to values. The specific problem of "values language" has now been identified by an increasing number of thinkers and, if the identification of a problem with such a shift is accurate, calls for solutions. It is clear that other problems that have been identified in culture (such as "fragmentation", "lack of caring for others", "selfishness" and "individualism") may be seen to be exacerbated by "values".

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2   Andrew 1995:170.

The conclusion is that the failure to notice the difference has led to the weakening of the moral understanding of virtually everyone in today's world — religious, non-religious, conservative, liberal, male or female, communitarian or individualist. The use of "values language" by teachers and in curriculum materials has led to nothing less than a reduction in the moral vision of all citizens. This reduced moral understanding has grave consequences for society on the personal and community level as all objective claims of justice are reduced to claims of power or appeals to "feeling".

"Values language" leads to a reduction in the ability of citizens to engage culture with richer understandings from their traditions — traditions which, prior to the last hundred years, knew nothing of the language of "values" as a moral language and which cannot be maintained or nurtured within "values" constructs framed within what I have called the primary axiom referred to above.[3] Only a recognition of the problem of "values language" a relearning of important concepts and a restructuring of education in all disciplines can restore the necessary moral language for citizenship and culture.

2. Values

2.1 What do we mean when we use the term "values"?

Few words are used as frequently and with less clear meaning than the word "values". The term has come to occupy a key position in all sorts of discussions in the twentieth century, whether they be ethical, legal, political or religious. Yet the term only arose in its current usage in the writings of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and his influence on the German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920). The term "values", when we think about it, is from the marketplace of economics where a value is the price we would put on something — what we would or would not pay for it. In the world of economic choices it is perfectly valid to speak of something that is purely personal as ones' "values". The problem occurs when the purely subjective aesthetic expands to include the moral — where, for example, "justice" (a cardinal virtue) is viewed as a value in the way that vanilla ice cream, say, is valued above chocolate.

Various recent philosophers have commented on the rise of "values language" and its significance for society. One of the most interesting is the late Canadian philosopher George Grant (1918-1988). Grant noted how "values language" was used by all sorts of people whether they were "religious" or "non-religious" and that they took the term to be meaningful without realizing that it is a language that is rooted in power and subjectivity rather than in objective categories such as truth or virtue. As such this language is the enemy of goodness and essentially usurps "truth talk", as it undercuts and defeats reverence.

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3   "you have your values and I have mine".

The English literary critic, scholar and lay theologian, C. S. Lewis (1898-1963), wrote of the movement in philosophy in the direction of the "inflation of the subject and the deflation of the object".[4] We see the flowering of this language in moral debates in which "choice" or "my values" are seen as somehow a category that defies analysis in terms of the surrounding facts and moral claims. To wish to *choose* something is deemed to be virtually outside moral evaluation and it is the height of what is impermissible to judge someone else's values (choices) — such a critique is deemed to be "imposing your values" upon another person. Rarely does anyone explain how a "value" can actually be imposed or how convictions or principles can or ought to be shared. Most people who reject some notion of imposing values would also object to all forms of sharing convictions or principles. Why is sharing of a principle a supposedly good thing but "imposing" a value a bad thing? These important distinctions are seldom discussed.

Of course, the idea that somehow the fact of choosing something justifies it is flawed, because a choice can never be judged as moral or immoral unless one knows *the framework of rights and obligations or duties within which a choice is being made*. Only when we have lost confidence in truth can the fact of choosing be elevated over the thing chosen. Culturally many have, in theory, lost confidence in truth so this is why the subjective side, powered by language of "values" and "choice", is now dominant for so many. Though a general problem, the rise of "values" language is particularly interesting when it is used across lines that one would have thought would have resisted such blurring. Thus, many religious believers — those people who have, supposedly, some concept of objective truths, nonetheless use "values" language and often in ways where it is clear that they wish to attach an objective truth to the term "values". Thus, in contemporary social debates, we see "religious values" used in attempts to argue for an objective category of principle that it is thought the listener ought to endorse.

Yet, such an attempt must fail in the world of the primary axiom because it is necessarily the case that a "value" is *essentially personal* despite the speaker's hope that a "value" can be objectively true. The virtually complete conquest of the objective language of "virtue" in all religions and of contemporary elites in all disciplines *almost without comment*, is, perhaps, one of the most startling aspects of values language in our time.

Where the context does not make it clear that one is speaking of an objective good or truth, it is virtually certain that a modern person's meaning when the term "values" is used will not be clear to modern readers or hearers who have been schooled to view values as expressions of merely personal judgment. To hold something as important in terms of "values" is to make a personal statement of a particular kind. Sue Rodriguez, who so narrowly failed to get the Supreme Court of Canada to find a constitutional right to physician assisted suicide, succinctly expressed the modern view of "values" as follows:

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4   Lewis 1952.

> Why on earth would anyone want to impose their own value system on me? I've got mine, they've got theirs.[5]

2.2 "You have your values and I have mine"

Whatever else "values" signify, the use of this language is highly ambiguous. When a person speaks of any category and seeks to ennoble it by appending the word "values" to it, an interesting problem occurs. Thus, "community values", "leadership values", "Canadian values" "Christian values" "liberal values" or "family values" only mean something if we all, together, have some notion of what "values" mean. But we do not and, because of what may be termed the underlying assumption of "values", cannot erect shared meanings on what is from the outset implicitly understood to be essentially personal.

So while it is usually assumed by the person using "values language" that they mean something objective (that is, something in the nature of things, something that is good or true irrespective of what they may or may not think personally), this is not what is heard or actually communicated. This is because it is essential to "values" that "*you have your values and I have mine*" (that is, values are essentially subjective, one person's being inevitably different from another's). Some may speak of "objective" or "intrinsic" values but if the primary understanding is of the essentially *subjectivist* nature of "values" then it is doubtful whether there is any ground upon which to place an objective claim.

Thus, since "values language" is, at best, ambiguous, and at worst, inherently relativistic, it is actually opposed to a language that could further notions of objective goodness and shared meanings. The recent bestseller by William Bennett *The Book of Virtues* narrowly escaped being titled, at the publisher's suggestion, *The Book of Values*. Bennett said "No, the book of "values" is the Sears catalogue". Bennett, at least in this anecdote, clearly understood the distinction.

When, say, an environmentalist speaks of "environmental values" or a Canadian politician of "Canadian values" or a judge about "Charter values" in the contemporary debates (or a spiritual person speaks of "spiritual values" or "family values"), we are entitled to, but seldom do, ask "whose *version* of these "values" are we talking about and what do you mean by "value" anyway?"

When we think about the issues being debated in Canada, for example, whether it is aboriginal rights, the claims of sexual orientation, residential schools claims or questions related to tax policy or immigration, how can we speak with any kind of clarity about "Canadian values" except at a level of generality that is not very useful? Second, what is likely heard by the audience is, in each case, something like: "the values which an environmentalist, the politician, the advocate or the particular judge believes in.

Consider the phrase often used by politicians in virtually all countries today: "Canadian values", "South African values", "American values". What are these? Because each citizen's conception of what national values are or should be, are

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5   Quoted in Birnie 1994:116.

so various, how can we speak of "Canadian values" or "South African values" at all? In the courts when "Charter values" or "constitutional values" are spoken of it is often as if these principles have validity that is foundationally understood as real and supported. But is this so? The fact is, as current constitutional litigation shows us, that what is or is not a "constitutional value" varies across a wide variety of possible interpretations. So what does recourse to "Charter values" or "Bill of Rights values" add except a comforting atmosphere that we do, in fact, have things that are foundational?

So when one speaks as if "shared values" are a reality, in what sense are they real? Are they real because they are shared? If so we are on dangerous ground because many things (consider National Socialism in Germany or communism or neglect of the environment etc.) can be shared that are wrong. But is this kind of radical ambiguity what the various people meant when they use the term "values"? I do not think so.

In each case the advocate for the cause of whatever sort was likely speaking about truth claims that he or she believes *ought to be shared* because they are objectively true and that are the case (or have relevance) for everyone to consider whether or not they (in one sense) accept them. But when we use the term "ought" we are speaking of morals and that is something we no longer are very confident speaking about. So we opt for the ambiguous and gentle language of "values" instead; hoping it will give us leeway and clarity at the same time. Alas, it does not.

"Values language" either relativises or makes hopelessly ambiguous all claims of objective validity. This is why it is the enemy of character, citizenship and culture all of which, in some part, depend upon shared understandings to develop well.

The nature of truth is such that it is not spoken about in subjective or relativistic language. At the very least we ought to wonder why a term from *the marketplace and economics* — "values", has come to dominate the former moral language in our time. While we may use values properly to describe such things as taste in clothes or favorite music, is it valid to say, for example, "you value *justice*, I don't"?

Most people would reject such a statement but, in the world of values, there is no real ground for objection. This shows the problems of "values" when the validly subjective preference blurs into an impermissible obscuring of morals and shared meaning. The confusion about "values language" in relation to law needs to be examined a bit more closely.

2.3 "Values language" and the law

Examples of recourse to "values language" in judicial decisions in the constitutional law area are numerous. We shall also see, below, that the texts of the *Constitution* of South Africa and the Quebec *Charter*, have used "values" as a key term.

With respect to judicial decisions, a few examples are given from recent decisions of the Supreme Court of Canada and the Constitutional Court of South Africa. A third, from a lower court in South Africa, quotes the American

Supreme Court's use of "values" and is given to show that the term is used in an American judicial context as well.

The majority Reasons of the Supreme Court of Canada in *Chamberlain v. Surrey School District*, noted that values are an essential aspect of Canadian society in these terms:

> ... Canada is a diverse and multicultural society, bound together by *the values of accommodation, tolerance and respect for diversity*. These *values* are reflected in our Constitution's commitment to equality and minority rights, and are explicitly incorporated into the British Columbia public school system by the preamble to the *School Act* and by the curriculum established by regulation under the Act.[6]

Elsewhere in the same judgment, the "values" chosen by parents in their choice of the form of education were referred to:

> The [School] Act recognizes that parents are entitled to play a central role in their children's education. Indeed, the province encourages parents to operate in partnership with public schools and, where they find this difficult, permits them to home school their children or send them to private or religious schools *where their own values and beliefs may be taught*.[7]

Yet, as the Chamberlain decision showed, not all chosen "values" are equal since, in this case, parents could not prefer that their children be kept away from classroom learning resources that portrayed same-sex parenting; to hold to these "values" under the rubric of the "fundamental values" of "tolerance" and "diversity" was impermissible. We might well ask the following sorts of questions: what are "values" in this context; whose "values" must triumph when "values" conflict; and on what basis do we make assessments between differing values systems under the rubric of diversity and tolerance?

As the Supreme Court of Canada has held more recently, "... not all differences are compatible with Canada's fundamental values" but what "values" are or are not within the "evolutionary tolerance for diversity and pluralism" was not elaborated upon.[8]

In light of this we might wish to ask how the "values" of parents (or other citizens) whose views differ from others can be accommodated (accommodation being one of our shared "fundamental values") when what is chosen conflicts with other "fundamental values" of the society or the *Charter*?

In *Fourie*,[9] Justice Sachs, in giving the majority judgment of the Constitutional Court of South Africa referred to "the concepts and *values of human dignity, equality and freedom*".

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6   *Chamberlain v. Surrey School District No. 36* [2002] 4 S.C.R. 710 per McLachlin C.J.C. at para. 21, emphasis added.

7   *Ibid*. para. 30.

8   *Bruker v. Marcovitz*, 2007 SCC 54 at paras 1-2 per Abella J., emphasis added.

9   *Minister of Home Affairs v. Fourie (Doctors for Life International and Others, Amici Curiae); Lesbian and Gay Equality Project and Others v. Minister of Home Affairs* 2006 (1) SA 524 (CC) at para. 48, emphasis added.

Another South African decision, in turn, cited an American Supreme Court decision that spoke of "First Amendment values" in the following passage:

> (T)he First Amendment severely circumscribes the role that civil courts may play in resolving Church property disputes. ... First Amendment values are plainly jeopardized when Church property litigation is made to turn on the resolution by civil courts of controversies of religion, doctrine and practice.[10]

The text of the South African *Constitution* itself refers to "values" in several places. The Preamble, for example, refers to the *Constitution* being established as the supreme law of the Republic "... so as to heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on *democratic values*, social justice and fundamental human rights".[11]

In the first Chapter of the *Constitution*, the first of the listed "founding provisions" lists all of the following as "values":

a. Human dignity, the achievement of equality and the advancement of human rights and freedoms.

b. Non-racialism and non-sexism.

c. Supremacy of the Constitution and the rule of law.

d. Universal adult suffrage, a national common voters roll, regular elections and a multi-party system of democratic government, to ensure accountability, responsiveness and openness.[12]

Chapter 2, dealing with the Bill of Rights, refers to the "democratic values of human dignity, equality and freedom".[13]

The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982), on the other hand, does not refer to "values" anywhere in the text. The Quebec *Charter*, however, does. Section 9.1 of that *Charter* states that:

> In exercising his fundamental freedoms and rights, a person shall maintain a proper regard for democratic values, public order and the general well-being of the citizens of Québec.[14]

It is clear, therefore, from references in decisions and from the text of at least the Quebec *Charter* and the South African *Constitution*, that "values" are deemed to be substantive and to contain a sufficient objective content to ground "rights" and democracy itself. This confidence in a "shared meaning" to "values" is in stark contradiction to the views of some of those, such as Edward Andrew,[15] who have studied "values" language in detail.

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10   *Presbyterian Church in the United States v. Mary Elizabeth Blue Hull Memorial Presbyterian Church* 393 US 440 (1969) at 449, cited by Malan J. in *Taylor v. Kurtstag No and Others* 2005 (1) SA 362 (W) at p. 380, emphasis added.
11   Constitution of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996, Preamble.
12   Constitution of South Africa, sec 1.
13   Constitution of South Africa, sec 7.
14   Quoted in *Bruker v. Marcovitz* 2007 SCC 54 at para. 76 per Abella J. (for the majority).
15   Footnote 1, above.

If this assessment is accurate then the implications for law and other disciplines are serious. Current recourse to "values" language to discuss fundamental elements of our constitutional arrangements may, in fact, undercut attempts to give a more solid ground to the meaning of those terms. Democracy, equality, liberty and so on are not, "values" but are concepts with a content that is knowable outside our choosing of them.

If the central aspect of "values" is our choice and if we have, supposedly, given "tolerance" and "accommodation" importance *per se* as chosen "values" then we may have provided a framework of such amorphous confusion that we in fact obscure what we need to illuminate. Evaluation of this conflict of opinion in relation to "values" and law is in its early stages and it is hoped that this article will be of assistance to further reflection in this important area.

2.4 The problem "values language" poses for character and morals education

The language of values raises a deep problem for educators if they have in mind that an educated person (or citizen) has, or ought to have, a particular sort of character or morality.[16] All sectors and areas of life now labour under the obscuring mists of values language. Education seems to be, in some sense, almost the bastion of "values".[17] The question is "why"? The earlier language of truth and virtue was based on a philosophical and theological framework in which the virtues were known, discussed and learnt as true aspects of the human person, necessary for the proper formation of character and culture itself.

The virtues were *moral* (philosophical) and *theological* (the "theological virtues" being faith, hope and charity). That framework was maintained for many centuries without being dominated by the frequent attacks against it. We have been much less successful against the modern attacks and their effects

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16 In case anyone thinks we can say that we do not have such an end in view, consider the question of citizenship in relation to a just civil order. Can we really function socially without certain very definite moral commitments to, for example, obey the law? Even in those circumstances where disobedience to law is considered valid what distinguishes a state of anarchy or nihilism from civil society is the moral nature of the disobedience to law. Martin Luther King and Gandhi had highly developed moral grounds for their campaigns against what they considered "unjust" laws. If we want, even at a basic level, to have citizens who are educated so as to formulate objections to "injustice" then we must necessarily object to an education that furthers moral incoherence. Justice is a richer notion than "values".

17 In Canada one need only examine those areas of the curriculum designed to address questions of "personal planning" or what is left of "morals" or "citizenship" training. In British Columbia and Ontario programmes, such as B.C.'s "Career and Personal Planning", required for all school graduates, "values relativism" is seen in a particularly clear form. A programme discussing the problem of "values" and its place in public school curriculum was aired on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporations programme "Ideas". See: "The Education Debates", producer David Cayley, broadcast September 1998 and January 1999. Copies of the tapes and transcripts of this important 15 part series may be ordered from Box 500, Station A, Toronto, Ontario M5W 1E6.

have been devastating. Corrupt a person's language and you have interrupted their means of communication.

The late Canadian philosopher George Grant, once said in a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation radio interview with "Ideas" producer David Cayley, that "… values is an obscuring language for morality, used when the idea of purpose has been destroyed and that is why it is so wide-spread in North America".[18]

Isn't that just exactly what has happened in the modern world? We see a generalized use of the deeply ambiguous language of "values" combined with a sense in general culture that there are no longer any shared *purposes* for human life — in fact, that any of us have any purposes apart from what we ourselves create as a function of our own willing them into being? The language of "values" is employed *as if it is* a moral language but conveying nothing due to the primary axiom that values are necessarily merely personal.

Now that the language of "values" has come to dominate many discussions about what matters to us most about how we live together, it would seem essential to renew an understanding of the objective language of truth and goodness in which valid principles are expressed not as "values", but as truths or objective principles or norms. Instead of speaking in the muddied language of "values" we should speak openly about good and evil, right and wrong, just and unjust and about what our principles are and about what we hold to be true and important for everyone.

Of course we may disagree as to what these principles are, but the discussion will tend to go in a direction, instead of around in circles the way "values" discussions must. As G. K. Chesterton once put it, "when you realize you are on the wrong road, the way to correct the error is to go back to where you went wrong". Our study and curriculum should provide a place for teaching about classical categories and the importance of the various traditions of philosophy and theology that have developed those classical understandings.

Consider the following extraordinary statement by C. S. Lewis: "… the real enemy to be overcome is not atheism but *relativism*, … I might almost say, let us first make young people today good pagans then let us make them good Christians."[19]

What did Lewis mean by "good pagans" and why did he think that Christians (and by inference any other spiritual seeker) needed to come to understand their religious beliefs only *after* they had learned certain "pagan" qualities?[20] What could these have been?

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18   George Grant, Transcript "The Moving Image of Eternity", *Ideas* (Toronto: CBC, 1986) thanks to producer David Cayley for bringing this transcript to my attention. It is obvious that the extension of "values" language is now virtually universal and terms for "value" used in the way criticized in this article may be found in modern German, Czech, Slovak, Polish, Dutch, French, Afrikaans and, one may assume, other languages as well since it seems to be a general linguistic trend representing a broad-based philosophical shift.

19   Moynihan 1988.

20   The implication of this observation for public and private education is critical. Since many western cultures have identified themselves as "pluralistic" or "multi-cultural", whatever programmes are introduced as a basis for "character" or "moral" formation

What Lewis saw with respect to Christianity is true of all categories where an objective concern (recall "environmental values", "spiritual values" etc.) is, in effect, layered over a relativistic base. The objective longing (for a better environment, for transcendence or what have you) is defused or neutered by its "values" framework. The same could be said for any claim that seeks to use "values" to describe something the user believes (implicitly or explicitly) to be objectively true — and this is the manner in which many people mean "values" when they use the term.

Language must be accurate; it must communicate what it means. So if it is correct that the term "values" no longer means what people think it means, the error must be corrected. Things are, as Chesterton once put it, "… what they mean not just what they seem".[21] In this case, a correction involves using "values" where it belongs — for matters of personal taste and economics, not morals or objective truths.

Lewis and the entire Christian and classical tradition until modern times understood what might be termed "the language and structure of the virtues." The problem of the decline of education in the West was realized a long time ago but only much later has the problem of "values language" been identified. Consider the following passage from a book published in the 1930s:

> Many have an uncomfortable feeling that the changes in morals which are taking place are not in the right direction, but as they have never been taught any reasonable belief they cannot suggest a remedy. That is one of the reasons why I have emphasised in the talks which follow the wisdom which has gone to the making of the Christian moral philosophy. For a number of causes into which I need not enter it has ceased to be taught, and is therefore forgotten. Rational principles are confused with Victorian conventions, and it is assumed without question by many writers to the Press and by novelists *that moral convictions are bound to be relative and based on feeling*. I have tried to show that the best thought of Greece and Israel and Rome is built into the edifice of Christian philosophy, and that that philosophy does give us a definite and high conception of human nature and its destiny. Once we understand man and what he can become we are in the position to lay down what is good and what is bad for him. Without such an understanding we are in the dark and what we do may wound human beings and bring about the end of our civilisation. I fear very much that this may be happening. The social

must not offend genuine pluralism. It can be shown readily that no major world religion objects to the "virtues" and these can provide a good ground for public education while leaving the teaching of religious dogma for religion courses, religious educators and church/synagogue/temple/longhouse/mosque instruction (to name several different traditions). It is not the religious leaders who object to "virtue-based" education. Selection of appropriate stories for education must be respectful of the diversity of beliefs represented in a pluralistic classroom but this is entirely different from saying that pluralism requires the implicit or explicit inculcation of relativism. Morals will be either explicit or implicit and "neutrality" is an illusion. Public education should be neutral as between the dogmatic claims of great religious traditions or the dogmatic claims of non-religious belief systems. This is not to say that any education can be neutral with respect to the virtues, for not to teach them is, in fact, to act against traditions of virtue.

21 Chesterton 1994:258.

theories which are now prevalent, almost without exception, misconstrue the rights and duties of human individuals and families and they lessen the sense of human dignity which every person ought to possess.[22]

The problem which the author of this passage described over half a century ago has now become firmly embedded in the language and thinking of the generations schooled within it.[23] Let us consider a recent example of how things currently sit with values.

How "values" are treated in a recent educational psychology textbook provides useful insights into the discussion.[24]

In an essay entitled, "Values Priorities and Behaviour", Shalom Schwartz focuses on "Definitions of motivational types of values in terms of their goals and the single values that represent them" listed are: "power", "achievement", "hedonism", "stimulation", "self-direction", "universalism", "benevolence", "tradition", "conformity" and "security".[25] It is noted that motivational goals tend to be mutually exclusive.[26]

In Chapter 3 "The Dynamics of Values Systems" Clive Seligman and Albert N. Katz discuss such things as the "multiple value systems" versus "traditional value system approach".[27] The authors note:

> The question for future research is to find the middle ground between a picture of the value system as stable and applicable to all contexts, and one of the value system as everchanging in the face of transient forces. There are arguments for both stability and flexibility in value systems. On the one hand, individuals need to have coherent value systems reflecting their self-concepts. On the other hand, individuals need to be able to respond flexibly as the occasion demand. Just as one may act differently toward one's parents than toward one's friends, one possibly may use different versions of a basic value system in different circumstances.[28]

> Taken to an extreme, neither the stable view nor the multiple value system perspective is tenable. An extreme multiple value systems position would treat the traditional concept of the value system as limited to the case when the value the individual is asked to think abstractly about values.

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22 D'Arcy 1937:vi-vii, emphasis added.
23 Even authors devoted to critiquing "subjectivism" and "individualism" in relation to modern education fail to note the extent to which "values language" incorporated and would come to deepen the very turn to individualistic subjectivism they lament. Thus, C.S. Lewis and Harry Blamires, both critics of the individualistic turn in education, used "values" in ways anti-thetical to their overall endeavours. See Lewis 1943:27 ("traditional values") and Blamires 1950:153 ("supreme values" of "morality", "intellect" and "aesthetics"). Neither, in their learned and otherwise important and useful works, make any observations about the actual term "values" and how it itself undercuts the very objective virtues or objective principles they extol.
24 Seligman *et al* 1996. I thank Professor Seligman for making a copy of this book available to me.
25 Schwartz 1996:3.
26 Schwartz 1996:22.
27 Seligman and Katz 1996:55.
28 Seligman and Katz 1996:71.

> In this view, the general value system would provide no necessary pre-dictive power for behaviour or attitudes toward social issues, which would remain entirely issue or situationally driven. Neither our data nor those of other value researchers cited throughout the chapter support such an extreme view.

> However, an extreme stability position is just as unlikely because it suggests that a general value system is dominant and that situations only present relevant values to consider within the framework of the general system, that is, relevant values are maintained in the same value importance rank order as in the general system. In other words, the extreme stability position does not allow for a reordering of values, except perhaps in the case of a change over time, from one relatively stable system to another. The essential point is that an extreme stable value system perspective insists on one basic value system at a time. The present results contradict an extreme stability view;[29]

> *In closing, we should note that all values (or value types) are positive. Therefore individuals need not pay a penalty for reordering their value priorities. Probably each of the values is the most cherished in some context*[30] [emphasis added].

What does this mean? One can try to make sense of this dog's breakfast of mangled concepts but the logic of it ends up chasing its own tail. It is difficult not to agree with George Grant's comment, cited earlier, that what we have here is simply "… an obscuring language for morality used when the idea of [shared] purpose has been destroyed … ."

The individualistic aspect of "values" language is linked, by some theorists to its being both emotional, unreal and "non-rational". Thus, for legal theorist Hans Kelsen:

> Value judgements, in contradistinction to statements about reality, have a purely subjective character. They are based on our wishes and fears, that is to say, on the emotional element of our consciousness. They are valid only for the judging subject, for they are not verifiable by facts. In this respect they differ essentially from the objective statements by which reality is described and explained, statements which are based on the rational element of our consciousness.[31]

When viewed this way one can see how deep is the divide between the theorists who wish "values" to be about what matters and what is true and good and most real and those who, like Kelsen and others, view them as individual, non-rational, emotional, not connected to "facts" and simply the products of will (or power).

The next section of this article will attempt to set out an alternative ground for language and education; one that, incidentally, provides a ground for social justice (including equality) that is not simply determined by power and subjectivism. The current "values" approaches undercut the very justice they purport to uphold.[32]

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29   Seligman and Katz 1996:71.
30   Seligman and Katz 1996:73.
31   Kelsen 1959:8.
32   Good 2001:22-38.

3. Virtues

3.1 An important introductory point that further distinguishes values from virtues

Before discussing the structure and content of the virtues, I would first like to make an important point that it is necessary to understand in order to describe how we, personally, in our moral choosing are related to the objective categories of virtues. So, please note: "virtues" are objective moral norms that are *both* shared *and* personal. They are, therefore, unlike "values" because, as noted above, in quoting Sue Rodriguez, the primary axiom of modernity is: "you have *your* values and I have *mine*". The use of "values" in an educational setting generally obscures even this distinction making it unclear whether "values" matter because they are good things or merely because they are chosen by an individual. If it is the latter, a moment's reflection can show that the mere fact of choosing cannot be an adequate basis for the selection of one's life purposes or goals. There is a need to weigh choices against objective criteria so as to determine whether the thing(s) chosen are good, bad, indifferent, bizarre, trivial or wonderful.

As stated above, while people speak of shared value categories (such as, for example, "Christian values", "family values", "leadership values" or "Canadian values") the personal values-base is more foundational and what is objectively shared is secondary and virtually irrelevant. "Christian values" become "the values which that particular Christian has" and I suppose "Canadian values" are those things we assume all Canadians have etc. But how could we measure these "values" even if we accept the proposition? What are those "values" held by those that disagree with the majority? Are they not values at all, or are they *wrong* values? But then, if "I have my values and you have yours" then how do we decide when one person's are right and another's wrong? This leads to the ambiguity and essential relativism that makes the category of "values" troublesome if not worthless as a moral language — as we saw in the excerpt from the educational psychology book just referred to. This is *not* the case with virtues.

3.2 Virtues, unlike "values", are necessarily shared and personal

Virtues are both shared and personal. They are shared because we all can know (and need to be taught) not only what they are (courage, justice, wisdom to name three) but how *we are personally in relation to any particular virtue*. This assessment is a matter of personal evaluation *in light of our nature and habits*. We are able to, without damage to the personal nature of choosing (and choice is a genuinely important aspect of the moral life), affirm virtues and our choosing without falling into the relativism of "your values" or "my values". The virtue of courage, to take one of the cardinal virtues, is shared but whether I am timid (too little courage) or rash (too much courage) is a *personal assessment* once I know the stories of courage and what that virtue means for moral conduct and can meaningfully compare it with my own nature. Virtues

lend themselves to narrative instruction. It is the narrative nature of virtues education that lends itself particularly to public school pedagogy.

Virtues also lend themselves to a certain openness to the ultimate conclusions. This is important because the family and the religious traditions ought to be the primary place for the formation of answers to the ultimate questions where dogma, doctrine and religious instruction are appropriate in accordance with family mores and traditions. But this is not to say that the cardinal virtues (to use the traditional term for four of the virtues: justice, wisdom/prudence, courage/fortitude and moderation/temperance) cannot be the subject for school instruction, leaving the theological virtues (faith, hope and charity) for home and church, synagogue, mosque or temple (which the statistics show us the vast majority of citizens identify themselves — eschewing the categories of atheist or agnostic when that is offered as an alternative choice).

3.3 The history of virtues: The classical tradition

Virtue may be defined as conformity of life and conduct with the principles of morality and the standards of right conduct. These acts are related to what sort of character we develop by our acts. For the Greek philosophers, virtue (*arete*) was the nature of the noble-minded culturally developed person; for the Roman, *virtus* signified the firmness and solidity which one who was noble maintained in public and private life. In the Middle Ages, virtue (*tugend*) was the conduct of the chivalrous person. The concept of virtue, has, however, deteriorated and the term itself, like a host of others ("tradition", "heritage", or even "right" and "wrong") has lost its vibrancy as it has lost its generally understood meaning. As set out above, now we tend to speak of personal "values" rather than virtues. We make our own "values" rather than conform ourselves to "virtues" as the categorical aspects of an overall (therefore shared) goodness.

3.4 The four "cardinal virtues"

The classical tradition (the most famous representatives of which are Socrates, Plato and Aristotle) developed an understanding of the natural virtues which could be perceived by the exercise of natural reason. The writers of the classical period had various lists of virtues and divided them in different ways. Aristotle, for example, divided all the virtues into those that were moral (having to do with character) and those that were intellectual (having to do with the mind). Though the others mentioned these virtues as important, it was a Christian thinker, Thomas Aquinas who grouped four key virtues together as the *cardinal virtues*: justice; wisdom (prudence); courage (fortitude); and moderation (temperance or self-control). The term cardinal comes from the latin word *cardo* (a hinge) because all the other virtues pivoted on these four.

3.5   The "golden mean" or *via media*

Also relevant is the concept of the mean or *via media* (sometimes called "the golden mean"). Each of the moral virtues (courage or moderation for example) are the mean (or middle) between two extremes. Thus, courage is the mean (or middle way) between rashness and cowardice. All errors with respect to the virtues involve either an excess or a deficiency of the virtue in question. Thus, the virtue of courage means that we ought to avoid the extremes of rashness (too much) or cowardice (too little). Depending on our natures we might have to move towards courage from either side of the mean (until our conduct becomes "second nature" to us). This is so for all the moral virtues and presents the drama of each person's development of a virtuous character.

For religious traditions the cardinal virtues are a necessary but not sufficient description of the full life. For public education it would seem that the cardinal virtues could be taught alongside the notion of virtuous development, habit, nature and the golden mean. The introduction of such material would be vastly superior to the current superficiality and confusion of "values" frameworks. It would be important to mention that the cardinal virtues are but some of the virtues and that another category existed for virtues: the *theological virtues*. It would be necessary, however, to leave open a full description of "religious faith" or "civic beliefs" as befits public (or non-sectarian private) school teaching within a pluralistic culture (discussed further below).

3.6   Natural virtues and supernatural virtues

In the Western tradition, the cardinal virtues (and other virtues of the same sort) are known as "natural virtues" because they can be perceived by natural reason. The theological virtues are known as "supernatural" or "inspired" (lit. "breathed in") virtues because they are said to be revealed and but for that revelation would not have been perceived in their fullness by natural reason alone.[33] But it is the teaching of the cardinal virtues and an openness to the theological virtues that will make the necessary correction and proper grounding for character education in a pluralistic society that is principled towards religion and not secularistic and, therefore, antagonistic to religion.[34]

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33   Because certain groups in the Christian tradition have tended to downplay or even deny the importance of reason in relation to religious faith, it is worth noting here that a fuller understanding of the Christian tradition observes that it is just as serious an error to ignore the mind as well as to over-emphasise it. Thus humans are urged to be transformed by the renewing of their minds (Rom. 12:2). Knowledge of God is related to our love of others (1 Jhn. 2:3). It is charity (love) that is the greatest of the theological virtues (faith, hope and love) and action must be united in the agape that is the greatest thing (1 Cor. 13:13; Rom. 5: 1-5; 1 Thess. 1:3; Col 1:5).

34   It is important to understand the nature of the society in which the relationship between citizens occurs. This is often misunderstood when the relationship between religion and the state (government and law) is discussed. Terms such as "secular", "secularism", "secularistic" , "faith" and "belief" need to be understood properly if we are not to prejudice analysis. Reading, as most people (including most religious people) do, the term "secular" as short-hand for "non-religious" as in the phrase "religion *and*

The virtues, in short, are not in any way enemies of beliefs and faith (of whatever sort — and every atheist and agnostic is also a "believer" in something if it is even simply their own reason). Every man and woman alive has "faith" of some kind in things they "take for granted". Who "grants" these things is another question but one that is beyond the scope of this article.

One of the deepest losses in recent centuries has been a conscious or unconscious separation from the classical categories of "virtue" as developed within earlier periods of the Western tradition.

C. S. Lewis understood the importance of understanding the virtues and said that "right actions done for the wrong reason do not help to build the internal quality or character called a "virtue" and it is this quality or character that really matters" (*Mere Christianity*, Bk. III chap.2).[35]

Much of education over the past hundred years or so, as it moved away from expressly religious roots, also jettisoned teaching about virtue and sought first gradually then entirely to use as a replacement term for shared meaning the term "values". But as has been argued throughout this article, "values" are in no way a substitute for the richer language and content of "virtues" and leads to a generalized loss of moral understanding and shared principles. However justified a stepping back from express religious education in public schools was, a respect for religious and cultural pluralism need not have "thrown the baby out with the bathwater". Given the complete absence of teaching about "virtue" now, it is not surprising that so many are rather lost with respect to what the virtuous life entails.

Aristotle observed that an understanding of particular virtues was more helpful than simply being urged to "do good and avoid evil". Now that this kind of vague urging in the form of "tolerance" and "equality" are all that guide what stands in for (but has not adequately replaced) moral and character education, it is even more important to understand why "cardinal virtues" offer a genuine ground for the teaching of "virtue" in the public (and non-sectarian private) schools of a pluralistic society.

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the secular" plays into the hands of an implicit or even explicit "secularism" which is an ideology that is anti-religious. Properly understood the state (law and politics and public institutions including public education) is best understood as a realm of competing beliefs. Beliefs that emanate from religious presuppositions ought to be under no disability in comparison with those that emanate from atheistic or agnostic presuppositions. See Benson 2000:519-539; Brown 2000:551-615, and also Benson 2004:83-98. The "religiously inclusive" conception of the "secular" was upheld by the Supreme Court of Canada in its landmark decision *Chamberlain v. Surrey Sch. Dist. No. 36* [2002] 4 S.C.R. 710 (Can.).

35   Lewis 1953:17.

4.   Conclusion: Virtue is essential to education and character formation

In conclusion, therefore, it has been argued that the "language of values", which has come into western education in recent times, is not a language that furthers moral understanding. As George Grant noted, it obscures moral language by seeming to offer meaningful moral categories while it does not, in fact, do so. It is a language that has, in fact, no philosophical roots that can support the important task of character and citizenship education or move us, as citizens, towards shared ends and purposes in community. If there is doubt as to the nature of a virtue-based rather than a values based education system, it can hardly be argued that the provision of a choice of moral languages is somehow the enemy of genuine and tolerant pluralism and diversity.

Philosophers, theologians and educators have been slow to identify the problems posed by a shift from virtue to values. The specific problem of "values language" has now been identified and calls for solutions. It is clear that other problems that have been identified in culture (such as "fragmentation", "lack of caring for others", "selfishness" and "individualism") may be seen to be exacerbated by "values": how can we then, in good conscience, continue to further "values" in school curriculum or in our own expressions?

In the world of "values language" communication, we struggle to live towards "happiness" and meaning with a language of "values" that confuses and confounds the search. Life and experience and beauty are such that, even with confused concepts, we find much that can make us happy and give us joy and wisdom. Sadly, however, much of this kind of searching depends very much on "hit and miss"[36] and is in spite of, rather than with the assistance of the language previously used for morals, character and meaning themselves: the very language, in short, that, crafted over millennia, we find in the virtues and cannot find (except in fragments and on our own) in "values".

The task now is to redesign school and university curricula to introduce the form and substance of "the virtues" and build into school, college and university courses "the language of virtues" and the stories that illustrate them and their relationship to the happiness and proper freedom that is integral to human flourishing. An understanding of and respect for the categories of virtue, framed by appropriate stories from within different traditions, will provide a solid base for further investigation of the larger claims of meaning and purpose traditionally put forward by religions but than can be articulated, as this article suggests, in a manner that is "open" to all citizens.

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36   Serendipity is always a part of learning and life. Formal education, however, ought to seek to educate about those central truths and aspects of knowledge that assist students to live fully alive. Virtues and their correlative aspects (such as the "golden mean" for example) have, until recently, been recognized as important to living well. In the face of this historic tradition it seems foolish to leave the joy of discovery to chance and serendipity alone.

5.   The need for an educational renaissance

In the important task of re-forming education, we need to address the fact that we shall in many cases have to begin by training the very people who have the responsibility to teach but have themselves been deprived of the language and concepts they need to do this essential work. Nothing less than an educational renaissance is needed. It will have to begin with those in positions of leadership who have the position and vision to institute the necessary changes.

A daunting but wonderful set of challenges are ahead of us and the first hurdle has already been overcome. We have named the disease. It is now an open question whether we will have the courage and wisdom to do what is necessary to defeat it.

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