

The Good Student

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8

What is education? This question has been long deliberated throughout different social eras. From medieval times to the modern era, the values and goals of education have been changed and modified. Presently, the goal of education seems to be based upon building a prestigious social status and gaining material wealth. In order to reach this goal, hard work and intense competition is glorified in public and private schools alike. However, is the good student one that fulfills this seeming aim of society or does the good student require something other than the will to compete? The purpose of education ought to revolve around acquiring intellectual and moral virtue so that students grow as individuals with knowledge, for our *telos*, or our purpose of existing, according to Aristotle, is to become a fully flourishing member of our group.¹ The good student must conform to the purpose of education—to strive to be virtuous while in pursuit of knowledge—and to well-intentioned motives, for if the motives of a student, however successful, are base and vicious, the individual is not truly a good student.

In our society, the words “the good student” are often used and interpreted differently. A high-achieving student, such as a straight-A student, is separated from the idea of the good student, or the virtuous student. A high-achieving student may very well be a virtuous and good person; however, it is equally possible for a high-achieving student to lack moral development and virtue. The high-achieving student does not have the prerequisite of virtue, which makes it possible for a straight-A student to possess vices. The truly good student must possess virtue, without which he/she is not a good student. The purpose of education should revolve around this definition of the good student as the virtuous student, not only the high-achieving student ideal that is common in the modern day.

However, before analyzing the purpose of education, we should first define virtue. Aristotle states in *Nicomachean Ethics* that a virtue is a state of character, acquired by habit and lying between the extremes of excess and deficiency. Virtue is a state of character, for once you gain a virtue it is something you do involuntarily without rational calculation: it becomes part of you. Once an individual has acquired a virtue, it is further cultivated by the habit of exercising that virtue. A virtue in itself must be the mean between the extremes. For an example, consider the virtue of bravery. On the extreme end, bravery produces rashness and recklessness. On the other hand, lack of bravery produces cowardice. Thus the virtue of bravery is the mean between the two extremes of excess and defect.² Why must the individual cultivate these virtues? According to Aristotle, the virtues cause humans to fulfill their *telos*, or purpose of existing, which is to become a fully flourishing member of the human race. The virtues and the quest for virtue cause individuals to have a purpose for existing. From the idea of basic virtue, moral

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and intellectual virtues are each differentiated. The purpose of education stems from these intellectual and moral virtues that Aristotle outlines in Book VI of *Nicomachean Ethics*.

The purpose of education should be to cultivate one's capacity to acquire intellectual and moral virtue. Aristotle states that there are five intellectual virtues: practical wisdom, theoretical wisdom, scientific wisdom, intuitive wisdom, and philosophical wisdom. Scientific and theoretical wisdom both involve the necessity to observe and realize universal truths. Practical wisdom is the ability to discern the good life and involves both experience and the capacity to act, both of which are acquired with age. Intuitive wisdom is essentially the faculty that is “left-over” for it is innate wisdom that is not characterized by the other four. Philosophical wisdom is a result of both scientific and intuitive wisdom, but without all of the other virtues, philosophical wisdom is not attainable.³ The pursuit of knowledge should be based on endeavoring to perfect and attain all of these intellectual capabilities. Each of these intellectual virtues allows a student to progress upon the path to knowledge. Thus, this model of virtue should set the guidelines for the pursuit of knowledge and education itself. However, one cannot be a good student without the motivation to strive for both knowledge and promotion of the virtues within oneself. This statement can be described in the following logical sequence: If one is a good student then one pursues the purpose of education. The purpose of education is to strive for knowledge while cultivating the virtues. If one is not striving for knowledge then one is not pursuing the purpose of education. A student who fails to strive for knowledge and acquire virtue fails to move toward the *telos* of a good student. Therefore, if one is not pursuing the purpose of education, then one is a bad student.

However, there are other virtues that are necessary besides those presented by Aristotle in order to be a good student. The core virtues of the good student should be patience,

GOOD STUDENT (CONTINUED)

diligence, temperance, and bravery. Patience and temperance are necessary as academia is not an easy road, for it is filled with anxiety and obstacles that are not always easy to overcome. Failure is inevitable, but the good student, rather than despairing, learns from his/her mistakes and grows from them rather than striving for absolute perfection. Without diligence and hard work, knowledge is unattainable. Idleness does not further one's capacities or habits. One must also possess bravery or courage, for the quest for knowledge frequently involves delving into challenging intellectual spheres, which, however uncomfortable, leads to further development as a student.⁴ These virtues may seem unattainable to most students, particularly high school students who more often than not do not have the motivation to follow the virtues. Moreover, this picture of the good student is an idealized representation. As a good student, one must aim for this ideal, even if not all parts of it are perfected. A good student must be attentive to the many vices and faults that students often find themselves pursuing.

The core virtues of a good student are coupled with vices that undermine these core values. These vices include, but are not limited to, perfectionism, idleness, selfishness, and envy. Perfectionist thinking can lead to an over-obsessive attitude about academics, and rather than striving for the virtues, the student instead is consumed with the need to be perfect in every area of study. This perfectionism can lead to some of the other vices such as selfishness and envy. Comparing one's academic abilities to another's can cause the student to be overly competitive and lose sight of the purpose of education. This situation is all too common in our world today among upperclassmen competing for college acceptances. These vices draw the distinction between

the successful student and the virtuous student. The notion of success, as said earlier, is drawn from material wealth, or, on the high school level, perfect grades. However, a straight-A student could possess some, if not all of the vices listed above. It is entirely possible for a seemingly successful student to have vicious motives and actions. Exceptional grades are indeed an accomplishment to be praised, but if they are acquired by means of vicious motives and actions, the individual is hastening toward moral and intellectual decline rather than advancement.

The definition of a good student has been warped in our age to mean a straight-A student who attends a prestigious college, acquires a high level job, and maintains a high annual income. These individuals, however intelligent, often do not possess the intellectual and moral virtues that are necessary to become a fully flourishing human being. Aristotle sets up a system of virtues that ought to be the goal of education, rather than base material wealth. A student is entirely capable of being supposedly successful, but lacking in his or her moral and intellectual development. By following the virtues, the path to true knowledge, and ultimately philosophical wisdom, an individual can truly achieve intellectual growth.

Notes

- 1 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *Classics of Moral and Political Philosophy 2002*, ed. Steven M. Cahn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1
- 2 Aristotle, *Classics*, 192–96.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 207–208.
- 4 “Valuable Intellectual Traits,” criticalthinking.org, last modified June, 1996.



Scott Daniel

In 1844, the year that Friedrich Nietzsche was born, European philosophy was fundamentally a discipline of logic and reason. At the time, philosophers adhered to many of the same standards that they had emphasized since the dawn of philosophical thought; leading thinkers still used the strategies of induction and deduction to reach rational conclusions about the nature of the universe and work towards a greater understanding of fundamental concepts such as “truth” and “good.” When Nietzsche entered the intellectual scene, though, he found that the trends of thought in European society were stuffy, abstract, and out of touch—so he rebelled against them. In his writing, he sought to transform Western philosophy from a sterile, academic pursuit into a dynamic, artistic, life-affirming endeavor by exploring the Dionysian-Apollonian dichotomy that pervaded every field from science to religion. Although Nietzsche's theories were sometimes vague, far-fetched, and inapplicable to

everyday life, he unified and strengthened his work not only through his eloquence and artistry but also with a spirit of iconoclasm that allowed him to tear down cherished ethical standards and call on his contemporaries to radically rethink the rules of their existence.

One of Nietzsche's first works, *The Birth of Tragedy* (written in 1872), examined the tragic theatrical traditions of ancient Greece, which Nietzsche believed had harnessed a creative life force—one that he identified with the Greek god Dionysus—to celebrate the raw, chaotic imperfection of human existence. In the work, the young Nietzsche looked back longingly to the power and vitality of the Greeks' “Dionysian” impulse, which he believed had eventually been eclipsed by another force more characteristic of the god Apollo: the highly rational, stable, “Apollonian” philosophy common in his own day. Although Nietzsche later admitted in his essay “An Attempt at Self-Criticism” that youthful romanticism