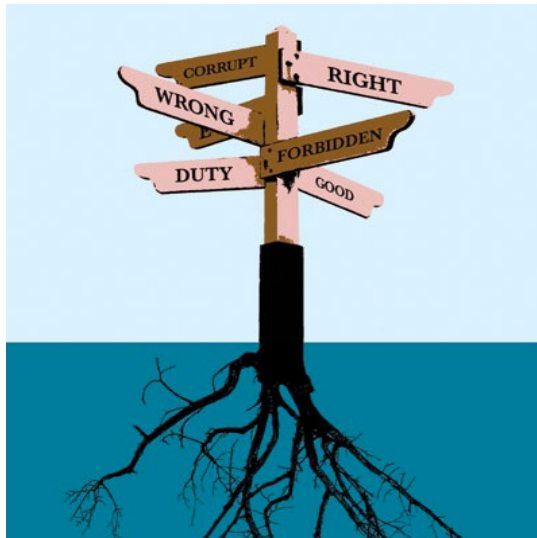


A Return to Moral Virtues

by James Sideras – Quality Consultant

Curocare has begun a new way of thinking that will hopefully make it a better organisation, for both staff and patients. Towards this end, I am releasing an article each month with ideas and tips that if applied, could enable you to transform and improve your personal life and your profession. The first of these articles concerns moral virtues.



interests of *others* rather than *self* (Nursing & Midwifery Council, 2008).

A false ideal

We live in a culture that has gripped civilisation with a false ideal of success, which has led many under the illusion that significance is a life bound with wealth, power, physical beauty or social status. People have tried to pursue this false ideal at a great cost, i.e. the

more we try the more we sacrifice ourselves toward its end without due regard for our own moral character.

A Significant life is one that never loses sight of the significance of others. The motives for how we treat others are paramount. Instead of serving our self-interests by actions that seek recognition from others; we should value others from a motive that seeks their wellbeing. What's most important is not what we do, but why we do it.

The good will ethic

Immanuel Kant an 18th century philosopher invented the 'good will ethic'. This principle tells us we must never treat others as just a *means*, but as an *end*. This can be summed up in the golden rule, "*Do to others as you would have them do to you*".

Only when you do something out of good will for the other person can it be called moral action.

For example, if we care for patients because it satisfies our ego, this would be unethical because we are treating patients as a *means* to an *end*. On the other hand, if we care for patients because we want their satisfaction, we are treating them as both the *means* and the *end* and under Kant's moral law, this would be judged as intrinsically good. This idea is in keeping with the professional injunction that nursing should be primarily about regarding the

Preserving our future

This whole calamity raises the importance of moral virtues and how they have arguably been lost in society. One only has to look at the recent economic collapse and unscrupulous destruction of our environment to see how greed and the interest of *self* is not only harming the way we live, but the way future generations will live.

The lack of social virtues has gripped all aspects of society, including institutions such as healthcare providers.

Scandals such as Winterbourne view and the many recently reported healthcare failures have exposed violations of basic human rights and serve as a reminder that if ethics are ignored, even more damaging consequences will follow.

Others v Self

Florence Nightingale realised in the nineteenth century that nursing should not just be about clinical skills, but a profession founded on human values. The selfless concern for the well being of 'others' (altruism) was considered one of the most important nursing values. Research studies have shown that altruism is now one of the lowest ranked values among nurses. This may suggest that an excessive interest in

ones 'self' (narcissism), more closely represents society. It is unfortunate this change has perpetrated the healthcare profession, which by nature should exist to serve others. I believe there are those who have chosen the healthcare profession as a *means* to an *end*, i.e. who use it as a career or as a job to merely pay their bills.

Virtues v Rules

At present the care profession is dominated by rules, codes of conduct and clinical outcomes. The dilemma is that they are external requirements and as such, may not be compatible with the kind of person one is. However, a return to moral virtues focuses on character traits that enable one to habitually think, act and feel in certain ways, which are compatible with the 'beliefs' of care.

The virtue of compassion

Compassion is recognised as a crucial virtue needed to deliver morally good care and features highly in the NHS constitution. Compassion is not the same as sympathy (*sorrow*), but is a virtue that enables one to *'feel and identify with the other persons suffering, whilst wanting to alleviate it'*. 'Kindness', 'honesty' and 'patience' are other important virtues that are also seen as crucial for developing a therapeutic relationship with patients. *High-quality* care and *virtuous* care are synonymous. Nurses and care workers who exercise these virtues will help to prevent the devaluation of moral virtues and sustain healthcare practice.

Cultivating moral virtues is instrumental to leading a morally good life and helps one to think, act and feel moral.

Cultivating moral virtues

However, this can only start when individuals begin to question their own values and make the choice to consciously exercise moral virtues. How? By treating people as both the *means* and the *end*. To achieve this, we must begin to see the world in a different way. Practising moral virtues tends to enable people to do well in life and helps others do well too.

When we see how responsible we really are as humans, change will come!

Here are some quotes on Character which illustrate the concept of moral virtues:

"Character is doing the right thing when nobody's looking. There are too many people who think that the only thing that's right is to get by, and the only thing that's wrong is to get caught." (J. C. Watts)

"The best index to a person's character is (a) how they treat people who can't do them any good, and (b) how they treat people who can't fight back." (Abigail Van Buren)

"Watch your thoughts, for they become words...Watch your words, for they become actions...Watch your actions, for they become habits...Watch your habits, for they become character...Watch your character, for it becomes your destiny." (Frank Outlaw)