

From the Challenge of *Virtue* to the Challenges of *Virtual*



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- 1 At the etymological root of *virtue* is the Latin word for man, *vir*. Many have noted this connection, but few have known what to make of it. A common, and somewhat predictable, strategy has been to leap backward and attempt to resurrect an image of heroism – Homeric, Roman, Stoic – as a remedy for the moral flabbiness of modern times. But such anachronistic equations of virtue with manhood or courage fail to take into account any of the range of associations the word has acquired since Homer. These include doing good, having sex with one person only (or no one at all), and establishing a republic – apparently disparate uses which are in fact all related. By considering their common heritage, I would argue, alongside the play of root concepts that these various uses suggest, one arrives at a fuller understanding of the emergent notion of the virtual.
- 2 Historically *virtue* – or in its Roman guise, *virtus* – invokes the concept of man in terms that are physical. On one hand, *virtus* has been measured as manly strength: Hercules was its Renaissance ideal.¹ On the other hand, *virtus* has been understood in terms not of sheer physical power but of mastery over the body, especially under conditions of extreme mental stress. Thus the virtue of a soldier – which the Greeks called *arête* and which the Latin word initially translated – lay in his ability to control the body's impulses amid the chaos of the battlefield, to hold his ground when the mind screamed, "Flee!"
- 3 As Alasdair MacIntyre has suggested, Plato's account of the virtues in the *Republic* was "part of his strategy to expel the Homeric inheritance from the city-state."² This coöpted virtue for the scholar and turned the word away from the purview of Homeric heroes, who were non-reflective and physical (as opposed to metaphysical). Even here the root connection to marshalling the body's resources is evident: the virtues were the undisputed crystalline centers – of character, of soul – that make the wise man

and teacher consistent with himself at all times. Both the Aristotelian understanding of the virtues (as dispositions cultivated for acting or feeling in particular ways) and the Kantian view (where acting virtuously means acting against personal inclination) preserved the term's bodily core. The Aristotelian thought more of exercising, the Kantian more of exorcising, but both measured virtue in relation to the body's "honesty."³

- 4 The virtuous woman, particularly according to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century moralists, might be said to control her body, except that sexual "liberation" took that vocabulary for itself. The heart of the issue here is not physical or even metaphysical but political. In other words, whether or not the virtuous woman had control over her body in relation to her mind was secondary. When her body was at the disposal of the family, particularly its male heads, the woman was represented as maintaining her virtue in the face of the world's multitudinous inconstancies. When a woman became the measure of her own worth and took charge of her own decisions about how to live, with whom, and under what conditions, virtue was represented as having been "corrupted." When a family lost control over her body, she was said to lose her virtue. All the while, paradoxically in the context of virtue's historical roots, she was gaining greater control over her body.
- 5 The *virtuoso* is one who masters the difficulties of manipulating the body to achieve amazing feats of agility. Thus in music, a virtuoso performer is one who sees an action with the mind's eye and translates it instantly, with no apparent effort, into bodily motion and sound. This sense of virtue as effect, and the virtuoso as one whose success is measured by effectiveness in action, is familiar to scholars of Machiavelli. It also provides a possible provenance for at least one sense of virtual reality, namely, as that which is as effective as reality (see also below).⁴
- 6 *Virtual* also could be understood primarily as a kind of corporeal honesty, at least until recently. To call someone a virtual dictator has been to assert something that might not be plain from appearance. For the person making this claim, the virtue, or capacity, of such a dictator would manifest an underlying state: some real or essential being not immediately apparent, a concealed corpus. In a similar manner, to call someone a virtual saint would be to ascribe an "undisputed crystalline center" to that person, despite its perhaps not being perceived.

- 7 A linkage to land is a prominent constituent of classical republican virtue. Machiavelli wrote that the vigor of an uncorrupt republic, like that of an invincible army, proceeds from a society of independent freeholders used to hard work and bred to endure discomfort. The natural and virtuous attachment is to land, but not in a transcendental sense. The ground for virtue is not the Earth, Gaia, or any such post-Romantic entity; it is property, a binding social construction that links a person to others in a particular way. Land as property gives an individual weight and value within a group. It helps provide what Hegel, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, conceived as the conditions of mutual recognition. Related figures range from “being rooted” to “getting around,” and these mutually defining extremes highlight telling shifts in the conceptualization of *virtue* over time. In maintaining a republic, *virtue* evoked the need for “rooted” citizens. In protecting public morality in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, *virtue* invoked the need for sexual constancy, especially by women, in modern society. In advancing sexual and political liberation in the twentieth century, *virtue* provoked the need for active authenticity by individuals of both sexes.⁵
- 8 The virtual saint whose saintly corpus is somehow concealed from the view of the church hierarchy, and the virtual saint who provides confession in an online “virtual confessional” appear separated by a conceptual divide. One is real but unrecognized, the other recognized but unreal. What links them is effect, force, or power; and this is the sense of *virtue* that remains in the English phrase “by virtue of.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* reports a seventeenth-century use of “virtual church” to mean “a council or similar body acting in the name of the whole church.” This is not a digital body that recognizes virtual saints who man virtual confessionals. Yet it is “capable of producing a certain effect or result.” In this sense, the *virtual* is “effective, potent, powerful,” and – according to the same source – obsolete. But is it?
- 9 Beyond popular culture, the question of the reality of virtual reality surfaces in a variety of disciplines from artificial intelligence and psychology to political theory and law.⁶ There the issue is precisely the effect or power of virtual phenomena.⁷ The importance of these discussions lies less in verbal answers than in the ways the conversations alter our orientations to things and people, in how we position bodies of various kinds in relation to one another. To the extent that our world is one of “consensual fantasy” as J.G.A. Pocock has written or a “symbolic public order” in the terms of Slavoj Žižek, virtual phenomena may not pose much of a change. It

has been several centuries, after all, that we have been actively cultivating “the exchange of forms of mobile property” and “modes of consciousness suited to a world of moving objects” with values that rise and fall with the apparent sense and order of rumor.⁸ Isn’t the virtual simply part of a long process, every step of which we have learned to accept with virtuoso flexibility? The question is not how real – and therefore how liberating or dangerous – are virtual phenomena, but how different they are from the already “unreal” phenomena that fill our daily lives.

- 10 Having written these words, I must step back – embodied as I am – to acknowledge that the virtual challenge is not some simulacrum of a challenge but a real challenge that involves the advent of things virtual: virtual documents, virtual hospitals, virtual pornography, even virtual empathy. These challenge the *virtues* evoked here. They challenge identity, sexuality, sociality, and political health. And they turn on a pivotal question: In a virtual world, what constitutes authentic control over bodies, whether physical, social, or political? Just about every word in the question provokes further issues, and this essay only sketches a framework for initiating responses to them. Rather than digging deeper philologically, let me pose the question in another form.
- 11 My nine-month-old son lifts his hand then opens and closes his fingers when prompted by the sound “Bye-bye!” He smiles and seems pleased without truly understanding the gesture or the word that accompanies it. If he understood after all, he might be sad, not happy, when asked to perform it upon Papa’s departure for work. He looks at his fingers, rising and falling as if they are not him or at least not his body, alien entities he is only slowly learning to control. It is not yet a virtuoso performance. Nevertheless I know one day he will make the conceptual connections to enter the realm of consensual fantasy, to join us there and dwell among us to the end of his days. I suspect he will linger on its fringes for some time, uncertain as to what it means to enter, just as now he is uncertain as to what it means to wave to Papa, who is smiling stupidly with his own hand flopping in the air beyond the glass of the kitchen door. And I am struck by a possibility: If one day he makes the conceptual connection from *virtue* to *virtual* and if, being a thoroughly contemporary child, he understands the virtual but sees virtue only at the dim periphery of his life’s experience, he may very well ask, “Papa, what is virtue?” What, I wonder, will I tell him?

Notes

¹ This was the image reborn, if not created anew, by Renaissance writers and artists, who saw Hercules as the *vir perfectissimus*, a symbol of “virtue in all its aspects – physical, moral, spiritual, and even intellectual.” Karl G. Galinsky, *The Herakles Theme: The Adaptations of the Hero in Literature from Homer to the Twentieth Century*, Totowa, NJ, Rowman and Littlefield, 1972, p. 197.

² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 1984, p. 131.

³ *Honestas* is the other Latin word sometimes used to translate the Greek *arête*. On the difference between a plural and a singular usage – the virtues as opposed to virtue – with particular attention to the history of Stoicism, see *ibid.*, pp. 168-70.

⁴ I am indebted to John Nelson, of the University of Iowa, for pointing out the importance of this connection.

⁵ For a cogent discussion of the trend towards feminizing virtue with the rise of bourgeois culture, see Terry Mulcaire, “Public Credit: Or, the Feminization of Virtue in the Marketplace,” *PMLA*, 114, 5, October, 1999, pp. 1029-1042.

⁶ Noteworthy examples include Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1997; Cass Sunstein, *Republic.com*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2001.

⁷ Sunstein goes so far as to make governmental policy recommendations that might counteract the socially fragmentary effects of the internet. His is essentially a variation on a very old riff: while clearly powerful, consensual fantasy may also “unleash” the dark forces that will destroy us. Turkle’s approach is more descriptive and empirical, while her suggestions about the fluidity of current identity formation among young people are less easily contextualized within the conceptions of *virtue* noted in this essay.

⁸ J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1975, pp. 464. Slavoj

Žižek's phrase is from his *Sublime Object of Ideology*, London, Verso, 1989, p. 68.