

# Teaching human virtues



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Human beings grow and mature through their experiences in life.

With the help of parents, friends and other people we get to know, human beings are able to learn many different lessons and knowledge. Human virtues are normally inculcated in our minds at a very young age, thought by no less than our immediate family members. Through time, we may or may not abandon the virtues that we believe in depending on our personal perceptions and our social environment. Nonetheless, human virtues can be taught not only because such virtues are ‘ social constructs’ but also because human beings have the tendency to teach things by ostensive definition which can easily train people into believing many different things.

John Locke proposed in Book II of An Essay Concerning Human

Understanding that the state of human beings at birth can be compared to a tabula rasa or a blank tablet—the mind is basically empty of knowledge (Wood, p. 652).

Conversely, we acquire knowledge through experience, specifically through sensory perception, as well as through our interactions with other people.

One way of learning is through ostensive definition or defining what a concrete object or an abstract idea is by ‘ pointing’ to the object or the manifestation of the idea. A child learns what a ‘ chair’ is when somebody points an object chair to a child and tells the child that the object is a chair. Similarly, a person learns what the human virtue of kindness is when somebody points to a certain manifestation of the virtue and tells the person to observe the behavior.

In essence, human virtues are abstract concepts that can be best understood in terms of their physical manifestations. For instance, the virtue of charity can be learned by observing a person who willingly donates some of his properties to charitable institutions such as orphanages. The virtue of bravery can be learned when a child sees a group of firemen trying to put out a fire from inside a burning building. There are also other ways to teach and learn different human virtues apart from ostensive definition. One of these ways is through formal education where students are taught what human virtues are with the help of books and other written articles.

To a certain degree, learning institutions provide the theoretical framework for these human virtues. Thus, students learn the theoretical aspects of human virtues in the classroom while they learn the practical aspects of these virtues in real-life circumstances outside the school. From the state of *tabula rasa*, human beings progress into filling those empty slates with learning taught from experience, including human virtues. On the other hand, Aristotle maintains that human virtues can only be acquired by enacting the principle of the “mean”. According to Aristotle, virtues are the “mean” or middle values between ‘excess’ and ‘deficiency’ (Yu, p. 341).

For example, courage is the mean of rashness—excessive courage—and cowardice or the deficiency of courage. How can an individual attain the human virtues or how can an individual live within the confines of the “mean”? To that question, Aristotle tells us that we should habituate our actions. Since every human being should strive to attain the good life or what he calls *Eudaimonia*, they should likewise see to it that they constantly practice the virtues so that they can be habituated. Following Aristotle’s

theory, human virtues can be taught because virtues can be—as they should be—habituated. By performing virtuous actions to others and by habituating them, others are, in effect, taught about the value of these virtues.

Those who are unaware of the idea that helping an old lady cross the street, for example, is an act of kindness can learn about the virtue by experiencing the act themselves. Children who are yet to fill their “ blank tablets” with knowledge can be taught about human virtues through constant exposure to the action and by requesting them to do the same thing in their lives. In his book *The Construction of Social Reality*, John Searle argues that institutional facts are facts that have been socially constructed. That is, human beings and the society in which they live in are responsible for creating these types of facts. In that sense, human virtue can be considered as an institutional fact primarily because human beings have long proposed varying theories concerning the nature of virtues. Without human beings, one can hardly say that virtues will still exist.

The fact that “ human virtues” are called as such suggests that, without humanity, these virtues would not have come into existence. Following Searle’s argument, it does sound reasonable enough to say that human virtues can be taught. Like factual lessons taught to young people in classrooms and in the family, human virtues are also taught in almost the same manner. Some can even go to the point where they create their own virtue systems. The fact that there are varying conceptions of human virtues also points us to the idea that human virtues have been formulated across different cultures in different times. While one act may be considered absurd

by one group such as cannibalism, another group may consider the act as virtuous.

Among these varieties of groups, every respective virtue is passed on from one generation to another, making it survive through time or reducing it into inexistence or into another form. In highly traditional regions, virtues are taught either through word of mouth or through practice. For example, the virtue of “ bayanihan” in the Philippines—the virtue where members of the community form a team to help a resident transfer his house to another location, typically through manual labor—is taught from one generation to the next through stories told to the younger members of the neighborhood and through the observation of the practice as it happens (Gibson and Zellmer-Bruhn, p. 283).

In more modern countries, human virtues are taught through a number of ‘ far-reaching’ ways; one of these ways is through mass media. For example, America is host to numerous television networks broadcasting hundreds of TV shows on a daily basis. Cartoons with a broad adult audience composition such as “ Simpsons” and “ King of the Hill” teach human virtues typically related to family matters through the stories of each episode and their characters. Children’s cartoons and puppet shows—for instance, Baby Looney Tunes and Sesame Street, respectively—are more likely to impart human virtues that can be easily understood and appreciated by children because they comprise the larger part of the audience share (Cross, p.

639). Those who think that human virtue cannot be taught may believe that human beings are incapable of teaching virtue in their pure form without

alteration or bias. In effect, they might argue that what we consider as the virtues per se that we teach others are actually parodies of a seemingly endless string of parodies of parodies, ad infinitum. The response to that criticism is this: alterations only arise in specific contexts; virtues remain as they are in their general form. For example, a father may teach his children that it is only virtuous to avenge the death of their murdered grandfather when they become adults later in life.

The father may have been given that impression about vengeance from the older generation of the family circle who also learned the “virtue” from those that preceded them, and so forth. And yet, the more general notion that causing harm to others is not virtuous remains. The more general notion that kindness and forgiveness are human virtues that should be practiced still remains intact. Others may also argue that human virtues cannot be taught because human beings are governed by their basic instinct for self-preservation. They primarily seek their personal interests and may or may not eventually promote the interests of others. Thus, they keep the virtues that can promote their personal welfare to themselves instead of teaching them to others out of fear of conflicting interests.

The response to this argument rests on the very nature of human virtues; they are called “human virtues” because they presuppose that human beings naturally interact and share with others. Without sincere interaction and sharing, virtues can only be regarded as personal philosophies or personal guiding principles and not as what we know of them to be. They are called “human virtues” precisely because these virtues transcend individualism and selfishness. Otherwise, they would not be virtues in the

first place. While it may be more or less likely true that human beings have a selfish gene, so to speak, it does not make them pathologically selfish beings.

Neither does it totally prevent them from teaching human virtues to others, especially young children and those who need a lesson or two about them. It is through our daily experiences that we are able to learn human virtues as we observe them and, more importantly, as they are taught to us by those who know the virtues well enough. Although some people may decide not to teach others about human virtues, it does not consequently suggest that human beings are indeed incapable of teaching human virtues to others. The fact that each person can decide whether or not to teach human virtues to others also suggests that they can teach these virtues regardless of their personal decisions.

A virtue taught to another individual may be in the form of an observed behavior, an ostensive definition or a theoretical example. Either way, human virtues can be taught. Not even the most selfish person in the world can deny the fact that human virtues have been passed on from one generation to the next. Works Cited Cross, Gary.

“ Crowds and Leisure: Thinking Comparatively across the 20th Century.”  
Journal of Social History 39. 3 (2006): 631-50. Gibson, Cristina B., and Mary E.

Zellmer-Bruhn. “ Metaphors and Meaning: An Intercultural Analysis of the Concept of Teamwork.” Administrative Science Quarterly 46. 2 (2001): 274-303.

<https://assignbuster.com/teaching-human-virtues/>

Searle, John. *The Construction of Social Reality*. New York: Free Press, 1995.

Wood, Neal. “ Tabula Rasa, Social Environmentalism, and The “ English Paradigm”.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53.

4 (1992): 647-68. Yu, Jiyuan. “ Virtue: Confucius and Aristotle.” *Philosophy East and West* 48. 2 (1998): 323-47.