



## Can Virtue Be Measured?

**The Second Annual Conference of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Values, University of Birmingham**

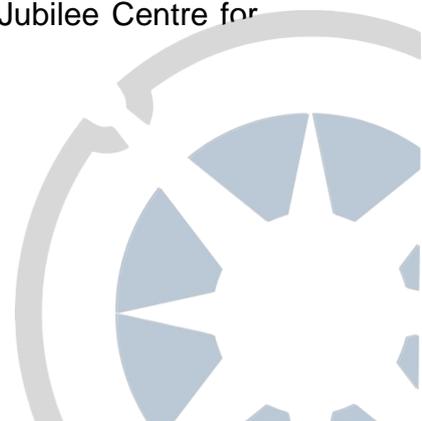
**Oriel College, Oxford, January 9 – 11, 2014**

### **Second call for proposals**

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Values will hold its second annual conference on January 9–11, 2014. Its theme will be: ‘Can Virtue Be Measured?’ We hereby invite proposals for presentations in parallel sessions. Please submit a 500–750 word proposal to [jubileecentrepapers@contacts.bham.ac.uk](mailto:jubileecentrepapers@contacts.bham.ac.uk) before August 15, 2013. The submission has to make it clear how the proposed presentation falls under the main theme of the conference and at least one of its subthemes. Notifications of acceptance or rejection will be sent out before September 25, 2013

### **Main Theme**

Practical virtue ethics is a hot topic in philosophy and in many cognate areas in the humanities and social sciences. In education, the study of virtue finds application in efforts to cultivate young people’s moral character, and over the last decade a number of interventions have emerged in order to improve character. Educators, parents and policy-makers must know whether such programmes work. A standard demand – that tends to be made of any educational intervention – is that interventions offer pre-tests and post-tests to demonstrate success; increasingly, the demand is that such success is demonstrated via randomised controlled trial. Here, a problem presents itself for virtue-based character education programmes. In order to prove the effectiveness of such programmes, it will be necessary to measure students’ virtues before and after the intervention and to demonstrate that participants’ moral character has truly improved. But how do we measure virtue in people in general and in young moral learners in particular? This is the question that will occupy participants in the Second Annual Conference of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Values.



A number of problems present themselves in this area, in particular for approaches grounded in naturalist-realist forms of virtue ethics. Firstly, there are problems to do with how we can know that others (and we ourselves) are, indeed, virtuous. The great majority of existing instruments to measure moral character – for instance the positive psychological VIA-instruments for youth and adults – are simple self-report questionnaires. Critics of self-report approaches complain about response biases due to covert self-deception (or even overt attempts to exaggerate one's virtuous character). In response, supporters of self-reports ask what measures exist to measure real objective moral virtue (as opposed to self-reported virtue) and the answer is not readily forthcoming: no tried-and-tested instruments to operationalise and measure moral virtue – on a naturalist-realist conception – seem to exist. Secondly, there are problems to do with what the virtues *are*. Experimental results in psychology seem to suggest that much of the variation in what people *do* cannot be attributed to enduring and general features of their character, but can be better explained as resulting from situational stimuli. If the situationist critique of character is correct, virtuous character either does not exist or varies so much with context that it will be hard to measure consistently.

How can we derive credible measures of virtue? How can we ensure that such measures are reliable and that they have real-world (predictive and concurrent) validity? Or is the demand unreasonable? Have we, by demanding that virtue be assessed, succumbed to a culture of instrumentalism, testing and accountability, inimical to real education? The purpose of this conference is to contribute to these debates and map out avenues of research on the evaluation of virtue-based education programmes.

### **Keynote Speakers**

Professor Stephen J. Thoma, University of Alabama

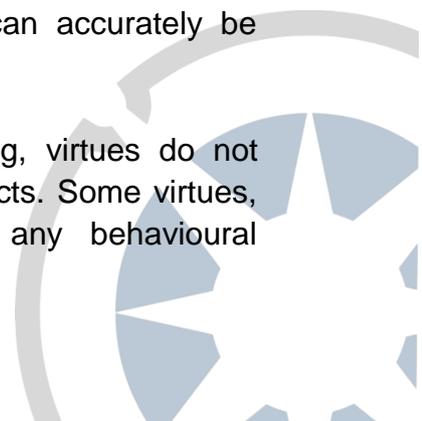
Professor Nancy E. Snow, Marquette University

Professor Randall Curren, Rochester University and University of Birmingham

### **Subthemes**

**a) Conceptual issues.** What precisely do the terms 'virtue' and 'character' denote? Is the dominant Aristotelian approach the best route to understanding them? How can individual virtues be operationalised for meaningful assessment and measurement purposes? Moreover, what does research about the effects of situation and context suggest about whether and how virtue can accurately be measured (or even exists)?

**b) Emotional underpinnings.** On an Aristotelian understanding, virtues do not constitute mere behavioural traits but incorporate emotional aspects. Some virtues, such as compassion, even seem to be possible without any behavioural



consummation. What bearing does the implication of emotions in traits of character have on questions of measurement?

**c) Professional virtues.** Are professional virtues simply ordinary moral virtues applied to professional contexts – or do they constitute a class of their own? Are professional virtues more or less difficult to measure than personal ones?

**d) Intellectual virtues.** The ongoing interest in moral virtues is currently being extended to intellectual virtues also. How can intellectual virtues be operationalised? Are they easier or more difficult to measure than moral ones? How are moral and intellectual virtues related to one another?

**e) Historical precedents.** What can we learn about measurements of virtue from the history of psychometrics in related psycho-social fields, such as research into personality traits, emotional intelligence, self-esteem, self-efficacy, empathy and motivation, and critical thinking?

**f) Politics and policy.** What are the political or policy origins of, and rationales for, the demand that virtue be measured? Do efforts to test the effectiveness of character education programmes derive from instrumental (and anti-educational) demands regarding teacher accountability?

**g) Self-reports.** What are the pros and cons of self-report instruments to measure character strengths and virtues? Is there any way to make such instruments less susceptible to response biases?

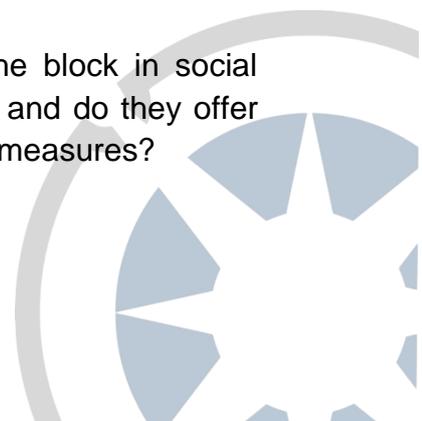
**h) Interviews.** Can we gauge people's virtues from (deep and/or extended) interviews – or critical Socratic dialogues?

**i) Triangulation.** Is it possible to overcome some of the problems of self-report instruments of virtue through triangulation, for example comparisons with reports by significant others?

**j) Dilemma tests.** Do dilemma tests, such as the DIT or ICM, offer a reliable measure of virtue?

**k) Observations.** How much can we gauge about a person's moral character through observations? How can observations tap into the internal aspects of virtue?

**l) Implicit measures.** Implicit measures are the latest kid on the block in social scientific research. Are such measures methodologically sound – and do they offer indicators of true moral virtue that may remain hidden from explicit measures?



**m) Neuroscience and beyond.** Does the future of virtue measurements lie in hormonal analyses and MRI-scans? What does the near future hold in store for neuroscientific explorations of character?

**n) Developmental issues.** Measurements must be age-appropriate. How do developmental issues impact upon the problem of measuring virtue?

**o) Instruments in the Jubilee Centre.** What lessons have researchers in the Jubilee Centre drawn from their first year of work – and how far have they come in developing measures of virtue?

