

Chivalry and the Classic Virtues

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The requirements of conscience have been a subject of reflection down the ages. Those principals which were already discerned millennia ago remain today of abiding importance because, as much as the world around us is rapidly changing, there are certain foundational ethical postures which are universal. They are not specific to a particular religion or culture, they are simply features of humanity that deserve attention and cultivation. These are the classical virtues.

Amongst them is the value of temperance meaning balance, moderation, a rhythmic equilibrium, not succumbing to ravenous impulses but restraining oneself. Temperance is an abiding virtue, the middle way between extremes.

Then there is the virtue of justice or fairness, giving to each his or her due, withholding nothing that is owed to anyone, taking nothing forcibly from anyone. Justice is recognition of the rights of every person. Just as one feels instinctively one's own rights, one acknowledges the same rights for every other person. And besides rights, every person has similar aspirations and they deserve consideration. So here is another crucial ethical principal.

And then there is the virtue of courage, valor of spirit, a readiness to suffer loss, hardship, and pain for a worthy cause. It means not being too concerned about the consequences to oneself but instead to do what must be done even if it leads to loss of power, prestige, and even death. Courage is that moral virtue which impels us to overcome our selfish calculations and rise to the occasion.

Then there is the virtue of wisdom. Wisdom gives an understanding of human nature, a gleaning of insights from the seasoned experience that comes from the passage of time. The culling of experience brings a kind of mellow, objective, calm, penetrating insight. Wisdom is an ethical virtue because all too often in pursuit of what seems good and right, a kind of blind fanaticism enters into one's aspiration. And although one is driven by an ideal and the task is not founded upon the desire for personal gain, still in the absence of wisdom, one might, though meaning well, cause unintended harm. So wisdom is an ethical virtue.

These are four of the foremost classical virtues. And the Sufi tradition adds a further virtue, generosity. Generosity is not only adhering to scrupulous balance in reciprocity but sometimes going beyond reciprocity in beneficence, in giving more than you take and being openhanded. And that means generosity not only with

one's possessions but also a kind of generosity of feeling. It means the readiness to smile at a person and give a greeting, the forthcomingness that sends you out your narrow concerns and unites you with others in goodwill. Of course, it must never be too self-conscious. There should be a naturalness in generosity. That's why according to the prophetic saying, one must give in such a way that the left hand doesn't know what the right hand has given. In any case, generosity means that one doesn't just live for oneself. One desires not only one's own advancement and fulfillment but one has a genuine desire for the advancement, fulfillment, peace, and joy of every being. The saints reached such a degree of generosity that their very taste buds enjoyed the savoring of food by others more than their own. Hazrat Nizamuddin had a certain fruit that was his favorite but he would much more enjoy to give it to a guest and watch him eat and watch his guest's tasting of it than savoring it himself.

On the path of chivalry, these are the underlying virtues.