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THE LIMITS OF A TECHINICAL CONCEPT OF A GOOD MARRIAGE: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF VIRTUE IN COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Blaine J. Fowers
University of Miami

Teaching communication skills is one of the most common approaches used to improve couples' relationships. These skills are typically presented as content-free techniques that are value neutral. Yet, marital therapists frequently see that exercising communication skills, particularly in conflict situations, can be quite difficult, requiring personal strengths such as self-restraint, courage, generosity, justice, and good judgment. These personal strengths are virtues that are presupposed in communication skills and are necessary for their successful use. The traditional attempt to see marital therapy as value neutral has made it difficult to recognize the importance of these virtues. Therapists might be more effective if they could help couples to identify and cultivate underlying character strengths necessary for good communication. This paper presents an Aristotelian reading of virtues in marriage that can broaden our understanding of marriage and open new avenues for helping couples.

From the very inception of therapeutic interventions with families, marriage has been a central area of interest. This preoccupation with marital quality is well founded, because, over the course of decades, research in the U. S. has indicated that individual well being is strongly related to being married (Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976; Glenn, 1991; Lee, Seccombe, & Sheehan, 1991; Weingarten, 1985). Moreover, these studies have found that among the married, marital satisfaction is much more important to personal well being than other factors such as occupational success, religion, housing, and finances combined. As Glenn (1991, p. 263) states, "it appears that having a 'very happy' marriage is almost essential to being personally 'very happy'."

At first blush, the promotion of marital satisfaction (or similar indices of benefits to the individual conferred by marriage) through improved communication appears to be so simple and straightforward that it needs no explanation. For this reason, marital researchers have concentrated their most sophisticated efforts on studying couples' communication (e.g., Gottman, 1994*a*). In spite of many disagreements about the sources and processes of marital distress, teaching communication skills in some form is a part of almost all current marital therapy approaches and central to many (Beach & Bauserman, 1990; Gottman, 1994*a*; Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Guerney, Brock, & Coufal, 1987; Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1991). In addition, there are dozens of psychoeducational programs that are designed to teach couples communication skills (e.g., Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994). Holtzworth-Munroe and Jacobson (1991, p. 110) echo the belief of many marital therapists that skills training is one of the most important aspects of marital therapy: "In the typical case, a great deal of therapy time is devoted to the acquisition of communication and conflict resolution skills."

Blaine J. Fowers, PhD, is Associate Professor, Department of Educational and Psychological Studies, University of Miami, P.O. Box 248065, Coral Gables, FL 33124; e-mail: bfowers@umiami.ir.miami.edu.

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Although this viewpoint is not universally held, there is a surprising degree of agreement among professionals, the public, and the popular press that good marital relationships are characterized by self-expression, mutual understanding, nurturance, and emotional closeness (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Fowers, 1993, 2000; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995). This article explores some of the underpinnings of the viewpoint that good communication is the key to developing and maintaining a good marriage. I have chosen to focus on communication-oriented marital therapy because of its preeminence in the field.

There are some empirical grounds for the emphasis on communication, as various measures of good communication are strongly correlated with marital satisfaction and are predictive of future satisfaction or divorce (Fowers & Olson, 1986; Gottman, 1994*a*; Larsen & Olson, 1989; Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988). Teaching these skills does appear to help couples to maintain or even improve the satisfaction and stability of their relationships (Bray & Jouriles, 1995; Markman, Duncan, Storaasli, & Howes, 1987).

However, it is illuminating to recognize that the most frequently promoted solution to the devastating fragility of marriage is technical in nature. Many marital researchers and therapists believe that improvements in communication techniques are the best hope for improving and maintaining marriages. It is characteristic of the modern West to propose technical solutions to almost any human problem. If we allow ourselves to become overly preoccupied with technique, however, we may lose sight of other essential aspects of marriage. We might, for example, become adept at the nuances of communication skills, but have difficulty articulating a rich account of what makes a marriage good, or we might find ourselves struggling to teach couples techniques when they lack the personal characteristics that are needed to successfully apply them. In this connection, Gurman and Kniskern (1979, p. 125) remarked that we may incorrectly assume that the spouses are two "rational" adults " who are "directly open to the therapist's suggestions and counsel on how to achieve behavioral change . . . in their own rational self-interest." They note that many clients do not enter therapy with this degree of "maturity," a serious problem in itself.

Historically, the personal strength and maturity, to which Gurman and Kniskern (1979) refer, have been understood as virtues. In this article, I argue that the successful exercise of communication skills is dependent on a set of virtues, and that these virtues have been generally ignored in the professional literature. Aristotle's concept of the virtues provides the foundation for this article. He defined virtues as the personal qualities or character strengths (e.g., self-restraint, courage, and generosity) that make it possible for persons to live a good or worthwhile life. These virtues are a part of everyday living. For example, exercising self-restraint by choosing a tactful way of expressing one's anger toward one's spouse can greatly contribute to a good marriage. Thus, one might cultivate and exercise virtues such as self-restraint for the sake of goods, such as a rich and vibrant marriage. From this perspective, individuals, spouses, and citizens cultivate virtue for the sake of some higher good that they have adopted, rather than seeking virtue for its own sake.

It is very difficult to discuss ethical or moral[1] questions such as virtue in a moderate or reasonable way. Many researchers and therapists have inherited an antiauthoritarian outlook that leads them to object to any discussion of virtue as needless moralizing that is more likely to blame and constrain individuals than to help them with their relationships. Some will read terms such as virtue, good, and moral in religious or dogmatic terms, with consequent associations of good versus bad, righteous versus sinful. Although moral discourse and virtue have been associated with the Judeo-Christian tradition, these concepts are also part of other religious traditions and schools of thought such as Aristotle's original ethics, Buddhism, Lakota (Sioux) traditions, and many others.

As a field, we have made some progress in overcoming the traditional value-neutral posture because we have found it to be untenable. It has become increasingly common to acknowledge the impossibility of value neutrality as therapists, but there are precious few examples of how we can constructively address the ambiguities of ethical and moral matters in our professional work that go beyond admitting the presence of personal biases. Increasingly sophisticated arguments have been made that moral concerns are not just personal matters, but are systematically and inextricably interwoven in our theory and practice. Feminists have amply demonstrated the injustice of a gender-blind approach to the family (Bograd, 1990; Hare-

Mustin, 1986; Walters, Carter, Papp, & Silverstein, 1988). Others have argued that social justice is essential to therapy (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 1997; Tamarese & Waldegrave, 1993). Contextual therapists have shown how interpersonal fairness is an essential consideration in families (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986). Multicultural theorists have documented the value biases of mainstream Western culture in our theory and practices (e.g., McGoldrick, 1998). Other critics have substantiated the presence of the values of individualism in family therapy (Fowers & Wenger, 1997; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999). The breadth and depth of the literature in individual and family therapy compellingly suggests that ethical or moral concerns are systematically intertwined in all of our therapeutic work.

If family therapy is imbued with ethical and moral questions in the way that many authors suggest, then it is important for us to explore this moral dimension and to clarify how we can best address it. We should not flinch from addressing these issues directly, in spite of our discomfort with a frankly moral vocabulary. The use of explicit ethical terms such as "virtue," "good," "courage," and "generosity" is startling to our professional ears, but that is only because the moral component of our work is often hidden behind an apparently neutral vocabulary.

As we explore the moral dimensions of marital therapy, it is important to respect our legitimate concerns about the enormity of this undertaking and about the potential for moral coercion by recognizing at the outset that we do not have access to any finality or certainty in these matters. As long as we recognize the limitations of our knowledge and wisdom, reasoned consideration of moral and ethical questions does not lead inevitably to value imposition. In view of the apparently inescapable moral dimension of our work and the enormous complexity of this moral domain, my purpose here is to take some tentative steps beyond the critique of value neutrality to indicate how greater moral or ethical awareness can enrich our professional work, particularly in the area of couples' communication skills training.

Doherty (1995) and Nicholas (1994) have paved the way to exploring virtue by illustrating how virtues are important in the issues our clients bring to us. They illustrate how questions of courage, honesty, and responsibility for others frequently arise in therapy and argue compellingly that if we ignore these virtues in our work, we severely limit our contribution to our clients' welfare. Here I will explore some ways in which virtues are already built into communication-skills training, whether or not we notice it. Although at first glance, the communication skills advocated by many researchers and therapists appear to be straightforward technical recommendations, on closer examination, it becomes clear that they presuppose character strengths or virtues that are necessary for their successful practice. Recognizing and exploring the role of virtue in communication skills training can help us to be clearer about our own practice and more effective in helping couples develop the personal strengths necessary to practice good communication.

Aristotle and some of his interpreters have been my primary guides in this discussion.[2] I have chosen to follow Aristotle's analysis here because it is the most well known and perhaps the most cogent. He defined the good life in terms of human flourishing or living the best possible life and virtues are the personal qualities that make it possible to flourish. The particular virtues I discuss do not constitute an exhaustive list, but they do seem to be integral to the most commonly advocated communication skills and thereby provide a reasonably clear starting point for what I hope to be a long and fruitful conversation. Of course, there will (and should) always be disagreements about what constitutes the best possible life, and the ongoing debate about what we mean by a good life is a vital aspect of any way of life. There are many sources for our ideas about what is good in life and concepts of the good differ across cultures and at different times. I do not pretend to have ultimate answers to such questions, but I am calling on us as marriage and family therapists to recognize that our work is centrally concerned with helping people to live the best possible life and is therefore a deeply ethical endeavor.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Nondefensive Listening and Self-Restraint

The first, and perhaps most basic communication skill is nondefensive listening (Gottman, 1994*a*). We teach nondefensive listening to help partners to focus their attention on what the other person is saying and

to attempt to really understand it. This skill reduces interruptions and the preoccupation with defending oneself and formulating retorts.

The virtue of self-restraint is pivotal to the ability to suppress one's defensiveness and attend carefully to one's partner's unhappiness with one's behavior. If one cannot restrain oneself, then nondefensive listening is simply not possible. Restraining the impulse to dispute the other's perceptions and justify oneself is far from easy in this circumstance. Nondefensive listening requires significant self-control, particularly when there is an important disagreement and passions run high.

The lack of self-restraint is common in distressed couples. When therapists teach communication skills, some partners are able to use the skills relatively quickly, and others acquire them over time. Every marital therapist has experienced clients who cannot practice self-restraint, and these clients' volatility and unrestrained affect make it impossible for them to apply communication skills. They may be perfectly capable of demonstrating the skill, but they cannot use it because they are unable or unwilling to control their emotional responses. The capacity for self-restraint, like the other virtues, might also be conceived as a personality trait. I will argue below that virtue terms have more to offer us.

Active Listening, Self-Restraint, and Generosity

Active listening is an important skill that has several components including the use of nonverbal encouragement (e. g., eye contact, nodding, and/or saying "um hmm"), summarizing what one's partner has said, and validating one's partner's statements (Gottman, 1994*a*). Communication trainers emphasize that validation does not require agreement with the partner but, rather, requires understanding another's point of view and acknowledging its legitimacy.

Active listening is dependent on self-restraint for the same reasons as nondefensive listening. The ability to encourage one's partner to continue speaking requires self-discipline, especially when he or she is saying unpleasant things about oneself and the relationship.

Encouraging one's partner to speak through active listening is also an act of generosity, because it is a gift of attention and interest and it grants that one's partner has something worthwhile to say. Spouses can be generous or miserly with their attention to each other, and making gestures that prompt the other to speak signals willingness to give attention. At times, the validating component of active listening requires even greater generosity. Validation requires the listener to grant that his or her partner has a legitimate point of view. This requires the virtue of generosity when one's partner has a viewpoint different from one's own even when there is no real conflict involved. It involves giving one's partner the benefit of the doubt. Validation can only be given, never forced, if it is to have any meaning or effect.

Validation can be excruciating when the discussion involves significant questions about a partner's responsibility, competence, consideration, or caring in the relationship. Being able to validate a point of view that is unflattering to oneself in this way involves a very high level of generosity. For all its usefulness, giving one's partner credit for rationality and good intentions can be extremely taxing during marital disagreements. The refusal to credit one's spouse with a legitimate point of view is characteristic of the worst forms of marital discord. As long as partners interpret one another in strongly negative terms, thereby acting ungenerously, there is little hope for effective communication. Validation indicates generosity in giving one's partner a share in the claim to truth.

Self-Disclosure, Honesty, Courage, and Fidelity

Various forms of self-expression constitute a third set of communication skills. Many marital researchers and therapists believe that self-disclosure is critical for maintaining love and intimacy in marriage, for expressing one's feelings about how one is affected by interactions with one's partner, and for asking one's partner to change his or her behavior (Greenberg & Johnson, 1986).

Relationship Enhancement (Guerney et al., 1987) is a popular approach to therapy that emphasizes the development of expressive skills that help the partners to communicate their inner realities in a way that is cathartic without arousing the others' defense mechanisms. "The goals of marital Relationship Enhancement are to teach clients the skills that they need to master in order to strengthen their love: attitudes and feelings centering on caring, giving, understanding, trusting, sharing, being honest, and being open,

compassionate, and harmonious" (Guerney et al., 1987, p. 157). Social-learning/cognitive marital therapists have also come to emphasize expressive communication as a way to promote spousal intimacy (Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1991).

Reflection on the quality or qualities that would make it possible for significant self-disclosure leads to the recognition of several virtues. Honesty or truthfulness is obviously necessary. Self-disclosure would be nothing but a sham if one did not disclose honestly. I call attention to this point because its very obviousness has made it easy to overlook honesty as a moral matter in communication theories.

Revealing important aspects of oneself may draw one closer to a partner, but it also leaves one open to being hurt by that person. All of these types of disclosure involve a certain degree of vulnerability, by exposing one's feelings or wants when it is often much easier to criticize or to remain silent. Making oneself vulnerable in communication requires courage. This use of the term is consistent with, but significantly less extreme than the battlefield courage to which Aristotle typically referred (even though some couples' interactions resemble nothing so much as a battlefield).

These disclosures generally occur gradually and may deepen only with time and as trust develops. Nevertheless, each new revelation involves risk that requires courage to undertake. This is even truer when a couple is experiencing significant conflict, characterized as it often is by misunderstanding and hostility. Yet communication researchers and trainers recommend significant self-disclosure during conflict in letting one's partner know what is problematic, expressing one's feelings about it, and asking for specific change. It is no wonder that spouses' courage fails them so frequently given the rigors and vulnerabilities involved in this kind of communication.

Trust becomes increasingly important as the partners disclose to one another. Acting in a trustworthy manner and perceiving one's spouse as trustworthy are essential if this process is to continue and bear the fruit of intimacy (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986). Trustworthiness is another virtue that is necessary for mutual self-disclosure. Being able to rely on one's partner to respond to one's self-revelations in a compassionate and caring manner at the time and to avoid misusing it later is only possible when the partner is faithful and trustworthy.

Editing, Self-Restraint, and Judgment

Communication trainers also caution couples not to use honesty as an excuse for striking out destructively. For this reason, Gottman, Notarius, and Markman (1976) suggest another skill called "editing," in which one decides carefully what to say and how to say it. They offer nine guidelines for editing including politeness, sincerity, courtesy, interest in the spouse, and the like. This common-sense suggestion to limit one's utterances can only be carried out by exercising self-restraint. For editing is, first of all, refraining (for the sake of the marriage) from saying things one would like to say.

The capacity for judgment is necessary if one is to edit one's communication effectively. Exercising judgment does not refer to being judgmental, critical or condemning. Rather, judgment refers to the capacity to understand what is important in a situation and how best to respond to the circumstances. Judgment is the ability to differentiate between what is appropriate or helpful and what is harmful in communication at a particular time in a particular relationship. In this way, judgment is the foundation for the ability to edit our communication.

Judgment or practical wisdom is a key to virtue, according to Aristotle, because we must continually make choices about how best to achieve the good. Exercising virtue requires the capacity to judge which actions are best in a particular circumstance. For example, finding an appropriate balance of self-disclosure and editing in an exchange is a matter of judgment. It is interesting that both Aristotle and proponents of communication skills recognize that this balance cannot be routinized in a set of rules that spell out when to exercise which virtue (MacIntyre, 1981). Gottman et al. (1976, p. 39) acknowledged this by saying that "[i]t is impossible to state the 'perfect' balance between leveling [self-disclosure] and editing; all couples will differ on what is best for them." The admission of the need for judgment by communication trainers is particularly striking in view of their strong inclination toward specifying technical means for achieving relationship satisfaction. MacIntyre (1981) remarks that the absence of specific rules in Aristotle's

Nicomachean Ethics is astonishing to modern readers, but Aristotle steadfastly holds that judgment must be exercised in each situation and ethical rules can never be delineated in advance for all circumstances.

Aristotle also defines virtues in terms of the golden mean. For each virtue there are two attendant vices corresponding to excess and deficiency. For example, courage lies between rashness (excess) and cowardice (deficiency), generosity between prodigality and stinginess. Moreover, the appropriate exercise of a virtue will always vary according to the circumstance, such that the degree of self-restraint appropriate to one situation may be woefully inadequate to another and excessive in a third. Hence judgment is indispensable to virtue and guides one's decisions in just how courageous or restrained to be in a given situation. Exercising judgment means understanding what is at stake and responding to the situation in the right measure, as a wise person would within a particular set of circumstances.

GENERAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF VIRTUE TO COMMUNICATION

Constancy

As a central human activity, communication is not encompassed by the highly specific practice of virtues discussed so far. It involves several virtues in a more general way. For example, the development and maintenance of a significant relationship over time requires constancy or commitment. This character trait is necessary if relationships are to continue through difficult times and the mundane routines of everyday life. Without commitment, it would be pointless to get to know one another better or to communicate about relationship problems.

Constancy is also a necessary trait for the rigors of learning communication skills. Although there may be some truth to the common assumption that relationship satisfaction is the incentive for learning to communicate better, if the spouses are not committed to the relationship, there would be little point in expending the time and energy to learn and practice these skills. The application of these skills is difficult and awkward in the beginning and their usefulness must be taken on faith initially. One of the most common ways that couples fail to benefit from skills training is that they do not continue to practice them.

Justice

Our contemporary views of marriage continue to be influenced strongly by feminist thought that emphasizes, at a minimum, the pursuit of gender equity. The oppression of women within families has been of particular concern to feminists (Hare-Mustin, 1986; Walters et al., 1988) and is echoed in the mainstream interest in egalitarian relationships (Bellah et al., 1985). These two strands of contemporary culture point to the importance of the ongoing consideration of justice in marital relationships. The companionate, egalitarian marriage that most individuals espouse (at least in principle; Fowers, 1991) requires that the partners treat one another fairly. Frequent experiences of injustice will make it difficult, if not impossible, to maintain the kind of trust and openness necessary for successful communication and emotional intimacy.

Friendship

Aristotle discussed another key virtue that should not be left out of any discussion of the good marriage. Cooper (1980) believes that Aristotle's moral philosophy can only be fully understood if the virtue of friendship is given proper attention. Aristotle asserted that friendship was a central virtue underlying all social structures. The two central features of friendship are: (1) sharing a common conception and pursuit of the good; and (2) "wanting for someone what one thinks good, for his [sic] sake and not for one's own, and being inclined, so far as one can, to do such things for him" (quoted in Cooper, 1980, p. 302).

For Aristotle, friendship makes social bonds possible in a variety of contexts, not least the community itself. He saw family relationships as the original—and in many ways, central—instances of friendship (Cooper, 1980). Although both Aristotle and contemporary commentators discuss marriage in terms of the friendship between the partners, Aristotle's understanding of friendship differs from our own in several important respects. For example, although he saw mutual affection as important in relationships, it is secondary to his conception of the real basis of friendship: The shared pursuit of the good. In Aristotle's

view, the emotional attachment we take to be the defining feature of friendships was seen as a by-product of a deeper bond.

Aristotle distinguished three types of friendships: Those characterized by mutual benefit, those involving mutual pleasure, and the paradigm case of virtue friendships that are based on recognition of one another's moral goodness. All three types of friendships involve the pursuit of the good, and in all three cases, friends are committed to doing well for each other. Pleasure and advantage friendships are based on the mutual benefits the friends accrue. Virtue friendships have a deeper and more enduring bond that is rooted in a mutual recognition of excellence in character. This higher form of friendship may also involve pleasure and benefit, but it transcends these considerations. The other two types of friendships are seen as lesser because they are more self-centered in the emphasis on the exchange of enjoyment or benefits and because the relationship lasts only so long as the mutual pleasure or advantage endures.

Discussions of contemporary marriage generally take its basis to be some combination of mutual pleasure and benefit. The common emphasis on marital satisfaction as the central indicator of a good marriage suggests that mutually induced individual happiness is the central aim of marriage. The emphasis on intimacy, enjoying leisure time together, and a good sexual relationship also indicate the centrality of mutual gratification in contemporary conceptions of a good marriage.

Marriage is recognized as a source of mutual benefit as well. Holtzworth-Munroe and Jacobson (1991) expressed this clearly in asserting that "Every relationship is satisfying to the degree that the partners provide each other with benefits" (p. 99) and that "People marry because of both the actual and perceived potential for the provision of benefits and rewards" (p. 101). Marriage apparently pays off for many, as indicated by a substantial literature on the benefits of marriage for physical health (Lillard & Waite, 1995; Ross, Mirowski, & Goldstein, 1990) and psychological well being (Glenn, 1991; Weingarten, 1985).

Mutual pleasure and mutual benefit are widely viewed in the U. S. as the primary basis for marriage. Aristotle's contrasting virtue-based friendship may be important to couple therapists because our popular and professional understandings of marriage have become increasingly problematic as I have discussed elsewhere (Fowers, 2000). Marriage is enormously important in our society and yet a large percentage of marriages end in divorce. In a renewed pursuit of marital bliss, the vast majority of those who divorce remarry. In addition, the high rate of divorce is not actually reducing the number of unsatisfying marriages (Glenn, 1991). The ideal of marital happiness is so strong in this society that spouses deceive themselves by seeing their marriages in impossibly positive ways in order to believe that their marriage meets the criterion (Edmonds, 1967; Fowers, Lyons, & Montel, 1996; Fowers, Lyons, Montel, & Shaked, 2001). This brittle character of marriage is entirely consistent with Aristotle's recognition that relationships based on pleasure or benefit endure only as long as they remain enjoyable or beneficial to the participants.

QUESTIONS ABOUT VIRTUE

Marriage and family therapists may have a number of questions about why an account of virtue is important for our work. So far, I have argued that virtue is presupposed in the practice of communication skills, but there are other important questions about the appropriateness of a virtue account that will now be addressed.

Virtue or Personality?

Perhaps the most important objection to my argument is whether the virtues I have discussed might not be described just as well as personality traits. Redescribing virtue in personality terms has a venerable history in the social sciences, as part of a quest for objectivity that attempts to avoid thorny questions about values, ethics, and morals. The redescription project can succeed only if personality traits can be presented as value neutral. Otherwise, personality traits are just another form of character ideal that are value laden even if those values are disguised behind apparently objective terms.

Let us examine the relationship between personality trait descriptions and character ideals with two examples. Self-restraint is a good example because we have various psychological descriptors of self-restraint readily available. Psychoanalytic theory calls this impulse control, and cognitive and behavioral

theorists might refer to it as long-term hedonism or self-regulation. These terms refer to the ability to manage one's responses so that more mature or long-term goals can be achieved. These psychological terms seem to be neutral descriptors of inner states or behavioral capacities, but the self-command that they connote is tied directly to concepts of character strength. The attempt at value neutrality fails because maturity, foresight, and self-command are obvious character ideals that are central to these theories. In other words, these theorists would unquestionably see maturity, foresight, or self-command as good characteristics worthy of considerable effort to acquire. Psychodynamic and cognitive-behavioral theorists are clearly not neutral about whether or not it is better to possess these capacities. Because purportedly value-neutral terms, such as impulse control or self-regulation, are thinly veiled descriptions of character ideals, we can see that such professional attempts to avoid the vocabulary of virtue have failed. The real question is why we would persist in this futile attempt at neutrality, rather than admit the fact that we are promoting a character ideal and seek the richest description of living well that we can find.

The capacity for judgment provides a second illustration as it is often treated simply as a cognitive function no different in kind than the ability to recognize categories or make generalizations. This is a serious underestimation of judgment that is a modern attempt to limit our understanding of judgment to a technical skill. To be sure, there are situations, such as driving a car, in which judgment can be seen as a matter of skill. The technical reading of judgment is inadequate for most of our social interactions because in social situations, judgment generally involves recognizing and acting on what is appropriate or proper, and these are ethical, not technical, considerations. In marital matters, one's judgment is informed by knowing one's partner and the relevant cultural standards and ideals. Judgment may have a pragmatic aspect, but it is always centrally concerned with the bounds of good taste and politeness in one's particular social context. Recall that Gottman et al. (1976) defined editing as politeness. This is an acknowledgment of the centrality of ethics in editing because courtesy can not be reduced to a question of technique, but always includes consideration for the feelings, status, or comfort of others.

Scientific and therapeutic outlooks have long promoted their own character ideals, even if these commitments have been discretely ignored. The curious, but austerely disengaged observer of natural events is the well-known ideal of the scientific perspective. Various therapeutic schools differ in their views of good character, but self-awareness, self-responsibility, maturity, and the personal strength necessary to pursue what is of value to the individual are commonly put forward. Far from impugning these character ideals, my analysis suggests the importance of acknowledging their centrality in our theories.

This leads to a second argument for taking the role of virtue seriously in marital therapy. We have recognized more and more clearly that we cannot be value neutral in our professional work, yet our profession is struggling to find meaningful ways to see how this awareness can inform our work in a positive way. Incorporating virtue into our work with couples can help us to enrich our therapeutic efforts and add a new dimension to marital therapy. Virtually all of us would agree that marriages characterized by generosity, honesty, and courage are better than relationships in which these character strengths are absent. Very few therapists or clients would object to helping partners to be more generous, honest, or courageous with each other (with the understanding that the exercise of virtue should be appropriate to the situation).

A third reason why virtue terms are preferable to personality descriptions is that they indicate that human action is not just acting out some script that is predefined by our personality make-up. Our lives matter to us, and we are beings with purposes and aims who actively seek to live according to our best understanding of a good life. The example of self-restraint helps us to see this, because when we exercise self-restraint, we forego the gratification of less worthy impulses in favor of some higher end. We, as therapists, do not encourage spouses to withhold their defensiveness and rebuttals simply out of long suffering tolerance or martyrdom. We think it is good to practice the self-control of nondefensive listening for the sake of an important goal: A better marriage. One partner's self-restraint allows the other partner to express him- or herself fully in the service of promoting mutual understanding and thereby improving the marriage. This relationship between action and larger purpose is an important aspect of how Aristotle defined virtue: Engaging in some action for the sake of a higher good (Broadie, 1991). If we take good communication and marital satisfaction as the good in marriage, then self-restraint in nondefensive listening is one of the virtues that we advocate in the service of those ends. All of the virtues I discuss here have this

relationship to the good. Part of what makes a settled habit a virtue is that it is done for the sake of some good such as developing a strong marriage. This relationship of personal characteristics and purpose in living is curiously absent from most personality-based explanations of human conduct. The virtue account of the capacity to use communication skills can enhance our work because it provides a rich understanding of the purposiveness that is inherent in the project of improving one's marriage. To the extent that personality-trait explanations do address the relationship between human goals and behavior, these accounts do so in two restricted ways. Personality-trait accounts either limit meaningful human goals to pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain, or they reject purposive human action altogether by portraying behavior as the result of causal forces residing in environmentally or genetically predetermined personality structures.

Does Virtue Create Inauthenticity?

Another worry that many people have is that exercising virtue may require us to suppress our natural desires and inclinations and therefore to act inauthentically. Aristotle emphasized that we act well because we have learned to love the good. That is, we act virtuously for the sake of living in accordance with our cherished ideals. From this point of view, many couples may come to therapy because they are unable to fulfill the ideals that they have for their marriages (e.g., happiness, companionship, togetherness). Helping couples to articulate their perception of a good marriage (i.e., set goals about what kind of marriage they want to have) helps to orient them to what they must change. If they want to have greater intimacy or satisfaction in their marriages, then communication-skills training will likely help and I have argued that certain virtues are necessary in this endeavor.

The development of virtuous inclinations and habits requires ongoing practice combined with guidance and encouragement. Practicing virtue is not so much a matter of exercising one's will against one's desires, because character education involves cultivating the kind of outlook from which virtuous action and emotion flow naturally (Kosman, 1981; MacIntyre, 1981). As Aristotle defines virtue, the virtuous person is generous or courageous because he or she wants to act virtuously for the sake of some higher good. We become just or temperate by acting justly or temperately and the practice of these actions makes them second nature to us.

The importance of making communication skills habitual through practice is clearly seen in Gottman et al.'s (1976, p. 46) statement that editing and the other communication skills "will be a habit you develop along with your spouse." They recommend that couples learn these skills and apply them "Over and over again, in many situations, until the skills become second nature and effortless" (Gottman, 1994*a*, p. 439) and to "Practice even when you don't feel like it" (p. 200). These suggestions are quite parallel to Aristotle's advice about character development, if we overlook the limits of Gottman et al.'s technique-focused vocabulary and their reliance on personal benefit as the sole justification for these efforts. I think their statements are one indication that marital therapists already do a great deal to promote virtue in marriage, but we tend to be relatively inarticulate about it. Developing a clear and informed perspective on virtue might help us become more articulate and effective in helping couples improve their marriages.

Does a Virtue Perspective Force Therapists to Moralize?

My evocation of an Aristotelian perspective on the importance of character will seem to many family therapists to lead to inappropriate moralizing and a morass of contentious disagreement about moral questions that are best left to individuals to decide for themselves. To be sure, this is a complex and difficult area, and this article provides only an introduction to one way to address these concerns within one narrow domain. Yet we cannot escape moral questions by assuming that they are individual matters. Numerous authors have shown that social scientists and therapists are already deeply engaged in moral matters, but we are often unaware of it because we do not recognize that our profession actively and systematically promotes individualistic values (Bellah et al., 1985; Cushman, 1990; Doherty, 1995; Fowers, 2000; Richardson et al., 1999). Indeed, the idea that moral questions should be left to individuals *is* the moral position known as individualism.

Although this virtue-ethics perspective may sound foreign, it can be used to analyze contemporary views of marriage without too much difficulty. In the predominant individualistic ethos of our society, the

goods that we tend to seek are often centered on individual well being, such as fulfillment, happiness (both as individuals and as relationship partners), personal success, interpersonal intimacy, and so on. The individualistic ideals of autonomy, individual rights, and personal fulfillment are an integral part of our worldview. Many take this perspective as the unquestioned truth, but it is actually only one of many possible perspectives on human life. Because the individualism in the dominant culture locates the good firmly in the individual's experience, most descriptions of a good marriage emphasize individual satisfaction, intimacy, and mutual support. The emphasis on personal pursuits is balanced within the individualistic tradition by the requirement that individuals work within and support procedural guidelines designed to allow one's spouse and others to do the same. Differences or conflicts in spouses' individual interests are to be resolved through mutual assertion and accommodation, rather than coercion. From this perspective, the virtues necessary for a good marriage include self-reliance, self-responsibility, self-awareness, and the ability to communicate and negotiate one's needs and desires in the relationship. Not surprisingly, social scientists and therapists have proposed that communication-skills training is one of the best ways to cultivate these qualities. Therefore, the question is not so much whether we will be involved with moral or ethical questions in our professional work, but how we will be. In that case, a more thoughtful, self-aware, and dialogic approach to the kinds of ideals we pursue and promote seems vastly preferable to pretending that we can avoid such questions.

As we have come to recognize our inescapable involvement in moral and ethical matters, we have remained aware of the need for proceeding cautiously. It is important to recognize that addressing questions of value does not require moralizing, however. When we help our clients to consider how best to act in their circumstances, we need not suppose that we as therapists know the best answer. We can simply help them to decide on the basis of their aims and ideals, the relevant cultural norms, and our fallible observations as therapists about what is at stake in their relationships.

Does a Virtue Perspective Add Anything to Our Understanding of Marriage?

How can Aristotle's views on virtue enrich our understanding of marriage and our practice of marital therapy? He offers an alternative to the individualistic definition of a good marriage in terms of satisfaction, intimacy, and emotional support. This alternative is important for two reasons. First, some have linked the emphasis on emotional satisfaction in marriage with the historic rise in divorce (Fowers, 2000; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Philips, 1988). Second, our professional emphasis on satisfaction neglects crucial aspects of marriage, such as commitment, loyalty, a shared history, and a shared sense of what is worthwhile in life. Although much of my own work has been focused on marital satisfaction, I have begun to question our reliance on this rather "thin" conception of a good marriage. My colleagues and I have addressed the poverty of the satisfaction-centered view of the good marriage elsewhere (Fowers, 2000; Richardson et al., 1999). A full account of a "thicker" understanding of marriage is beyond the scope of this paper, but Aristotle's thoughts about virtue friendships can provide some tantalizing suggestions. His views can help us to recognize that the individual emotional benefits of marriage are only one of the possible goods in marriage.

In contemporary Western society, we tend to see the goods in life as either material (to be possessed by the individual) or subjective (to be experienced by the individual). The individualistic credo grants each of us sovereignty over what we choose as the best kind of life. From the perspective of such an unencumbered individual, the social world, including marriage, is seen primarily as an arena in which one pursues one's interests. For this reason, the modern view of ethics and morality is that ethics are necessary to curb egoism and protect everyone's right to choose his or her way of life. This view of ethics only makes sense within the individualism that grew in prominence following the Enlightenment-inspired separation of individual and community beginning in 17th-century Europe. Aristotle's account of virtue does not focus on restraining egoism because primary goods are neither property nor individual experiences in his view, but can only be had in common (MacIntyre, 1981). Property and money are merely part of the infrastructure for living well, rather than its hallmarks. This means that Aristotle's ethics are not so much a matter of mediating between the interests of individuals, but of finding ways for individuals to work toward jointly espoused goals. The social realm is not only integrally involved in the cultivation of the virtues, but their practice is intrinsically social and the good life can only be found in virtuous fellowship (i.e., friendship)

and community. The contrast between individualistic ethics and virtue ethics illuminates two very different models of marriage, and the exploration of these different models might be very fruitful for marital therapists (Fowers, 2000).

An interest in the mutual pursuit of the good suggests a greater emphasis on learning how couples can jointly define and pursue the good in life that transcends individual gratification. We may learn that good marriages are characterized by such things as mutual recognition of one another's good qualities of character, a shared understanding of each person's role in bringing about their aims in life, and a joint commitment to doing one's part in that common pursuit. It is just possible that such characteristics are at least as important as marital satisfaction, but have been entirely obscured by our idealization of individual gratification in marriage and our preoccupation with the technical means to achieve that end.

A "thicker" understanding of how to cultivate a good marriage through virtuous action requires a richer conception of the good in marriage than is currently available. We tend to think of marriage either as an end in itself, in which we find intimate, nurturing belonging or as a means to individual ends, with this closeness and mutual support contributing to the individual's well-being. The perspective that I have outlined here encourages us to see marriage more as an integral part of the larger good in life. Although I cannot argue it here, I want to suggest that marriage is neither an end in itself nor a mere instrumental means to individual aims. Rather a good marriage is itself a significant part of a broader pursuit of the good in human living.

Experiencing the kind of friendship found only in these primary relationships partly defines the good life for us. This experience is usually characterized in terms such as happiness, social support, and intimacy. But what gives marriage the place and power to provide such important experiences in contrast to other relationships? Marriage is given a primacy in our society that no other relationship has. This primacy is based on the ideal that marriage is a life-long relationship that is, above all, a shared life. Marriage binds spouses together in a way that is unavailable in other relationships. The uniqueness of this shared life is, I believe, the real source of the importance of marriage. The kinds of goods we seek in marriage are unique because these particular goods are only available in this measure within the singular character of this relationship. The desirability of marriage is clear in its popularity among heterosexuals and in the strenuous efforts among many gay and lesbian activists to make marriage available for everyone.

CONCLUSION

The Aristotelian concept of virtue can enhance our understanding of marital therapy in three ways. First, it illuminates a dimension of communication skills training that has been opaque. It allows us to recognize the importance of character strength in learning these skills. Assessment of spouses' character strengths can inform us about whether they can benefit from skills training. Second, if spouses cannot practice the requisite virtues, this viewpoint suggests that helping them to cultivate self-restraint, generosity, courage, and so on, would prepare them for improving their communication. In other words, it suggests a practical way to work with couples who would very likely fail to benefit from a therapy solely dependent on communication-skills training.

Third, this perspective directs our attention and efforts toward helping couples to cultivate a shared understanding of what is worth pursuing in their lives. It emphasizes the development of a couple's identity in their shared life and an appreciation of the rich sources of meaning in their relationship history and in their future aims. These considerations broaden our concept of a good marriage beyond the individuals' marital satisfaction to encompass the shared purposes of marriage and the ways that a couple's history that makes the relationship unique.

Once we recognize the profound interdependence of our theories and our moral outlooks, it becomes clear that our theory and practice themselves constitute a form of social practice. We are accountable for the ways in which we as professionals approach marriage. We are seeing more clearly that research and therapy are not guided by disinterested theory that provides neutral accounts of how things operate. Rather, we are inescapably involved in expressing, challenging, strengthening, and shaping contemporary perspectives on what is of value (Taylor, 1985). If that is so, we must recognize that we are continually engaged in an ethical activity that grows out of and helps to shape our culture's conceptions of the good life. Given the persistent

dilemmas of modern marriage, it may be essential to transcend a subjective conception of the good marriage and a technique-focused therapy by questioning the validity and coherence of contemporary ideals of marriage themselves. Of course, this is a task for the age, and we must proceed with caution and humility. I do not claim any ultimate answers, but I am convinced that we must address these questions

The Aristotelian approach I have taken here is not without difficulties because it relies on a particular understanding of Aristotle that is certainly in dispute. Moreover, many may doubt that Aristotle can be a reasonable or reliable guide to the complexities, fragmentation, and subjectivism that are characteristic of contemporary life. My attempt to reappropriate an ancient perspective to shed some light on and enrich our current understandings of the good certainly thrusts us into these kinds of questions and the interminable debates that they engender. Ongoing dialogue about good marriages in particular and the good life in general seems vastly preferable to a narrow, constrained technical viewpoint that masquerades as the unvarnished truth and distorts the phenomena it purports to describe objectively.

The limits of mainstream scientific and therapeutic outlooks are clearly strained if we acknowledge the necessity of some understanding of virtue in the standard view of promoting good marriages. It may be time to acknowledge that these limitations have unnecessarily constrained and distorted our understanding of how best to live. A more clear-sighted perspective on the good in human life and a firmer grasp of how we might work together to attain it seem well worth the discomfiture of reorganizing our professional aims and self-understandings.

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NOTES

1. I use the terms moral and ethical as synonyms for rhetorical purposes even though they have distinct technical meanings in some contexts. Although some readers may be more comfortable with the term "ethical," I use the term "moral" as primary because the term "ethics" has become diluted and can too easily be read in terms of the restricted range of our professional code of ethics. The term moral connotes a dimension of life that is considerably broader and deeper. At the same time, I am sensitive to the power of the term "moral" and its connotations of extreme religiosity and moral*ism*. It is an unfortunate modern prejudice that leads us to read moral as moral*istic*. For this reason, I also use the term "ethical" as a counterbalance to show that I am not promoting any form of moralistic orthodoxy. In its Aristotelian sense, morality is emphatically disassociated from rules for conduct. Instead morality is concerned with seeking to live the best possible life. Thus, Aristotelian morality is not concerned so much with right and wrong as with the process of deciding which actions are better or worse, appropriate or inappropriate for seeking the good in each circumstance.
2. It is important to acknowledge and disavow Aristotle's views of men as morally superior to women by nature. This patriarchal view, which upheld inequality in male-female relationships, was embedded in Aristotle's cultural context. His account of the virtues and particularly of friendship does not require this inequality. My discussion of the virtues and of friendship assumes the moral equality of men and women.

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