THE CLASSIFICATION OF 'HUMAN VIRTUES':
WORK OF 'VIA INSTITUTE ON CHARACTER '

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SIGNIFICANCE OF UNDERSTANDING OUR CORE SELF

It can be said that our work on personal growth needs to begin with a deep understanding the core self. Each one of us is a unique being and personal growth is all about 'knowing' ourselves, developing ourselves and expressing ourselves in a manner that we find most fulfilling. Since human beings are so infinitely complex, there cannot exist a simple, single framework that can describe the 'core self' in all possible dimensions. But at the same time, a few powerful tools and frameworks do exist, that help us in understanding few specific facets of our core selves. The VIA Institutes Character Strengths profile is one such very powerful tool.

BACKGROUND TO VIA CHARACTER STRENGTHS PROFILE

The field of psychology has made significant discoveries about human mind and behavior over last few centuries. However the focus has been far higher on studying what is wrong with human life (e.g. defining mental illnesses , studying aspects such as depression , divorces etc.) and much lesser attention has been devoted to studying the positive side of human life (e.g. what makes people happy and fulfilled , what are characters of institutions that facilitate human thriving etc.) The 'positive psychology movement' that started in 1998 set out to correct this imbalance. Martin Seligman (University of Pennsylvania) played a key role along with a few other senior scholars in starting this movement. While talking about the perspective of positive psychology, he said '.. *we are as focused on strength as on weakness, as interested in building the best things in life as repairing the worst, and as concerned with fulfilling the lives of normal people as with healing the wounds of distressed.'*

One of the first projects that the Positive Psychology movement undertook was an attempt to create a universal classification of human virtues. The VIA Character Strengths profile and associated literature is the result of this effort, which saw some of the best minds in the world of Psychology coming together.

HOW THE CLASSIFICATION OF CHARACTER STRENGTHS EVOLVED

The team of scholars that worked on this project studied wide range of sources – including philosophy, religion, youth development, psychiatry and psychology. While material across cultures and geographies was studied, the focus was on identifying human universals. The Character Strengths framework shares certain principles with modern personality trait theory: it recognizes individual differences that are stable and general but also shaped by the individual's setting and are capable of change.

The classification has a two level structure – at the higher level, it has 'Virtues': which are core characteristics that are universally valued. The six virtues that have been identified are :

Wisdom, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance and Transcendence

Each category of 'Virtue' further contains a set of 'Character Strengths' – these are psychological ingredients – processes or mechanisms that define the virtue. For example, Character Strengths of Creativity, Curiosity, Open-mindedness, Love of Learning and Perspective form the virtue of 'Wisdom'.

Robust criteria were used to refine and logically sharpen the Character Strengths framework. Examples of few of the criteria used:

- Strengths contribute to fulfillments that constitute the good life.
- Although Strengths can and do produce desirable outcomes, each strength is morally valued in its own right, even in the absence of obvious beneficial outcomes
- Display of strength by one person does not diminish other people in the vicinity
- Strength manifests in the range of an individual's behavior – thoughts, actions and feelings. It is trait like in the sense that it has degree of generalizability across situations and stability across time.

HOW IS IT HELPFUL TO KNOW YOUR KEY CHARACTER STRENGTHS

As mentioned earlier, framework such as VIA Character Strengths provides a useful window and a starting point to 'know or core self'. A better and sharper understanding of our core self can be greatly helpful in our personal growth as it helps us focus our efforts on developing ourselves and creating things and a life that we find meaningful.

GETTING YOUR OWN PERSONALIZED REPOTR OF CHARACTER STRENGTHS

You can visit the websites mentioned below, do a simple registration and take a survey (it is free of cost) find out your top character strengths

https://viame.org/www/

http://www.viacharacter.org

Note: The references for this write up have been drawn from the book 'Character Strengths and Virtues', edited by Dr. Martin Seligman and Dr. Christopher Peterson. This work attempts to tackle some of the most significant questions such as 'what is character' and 'what is the foundation of a fulfilled life'. It is work of great scholarship and has very deep moral and practical significance.

On a separate note, the fact that even after ten years of its publication, this work is not so well known tells us something about the world that we live in and the nature of 'war' that we need fight for personal growth.

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