

## **Building Virtue: Character and Experiments in Truth**

Bill Puka  
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

“OK, you’ve convinced me that I should be guided by the major moral principles of the great moral theories. You’ve also got me stimulating my cognitive-moral structures for competent problem-solving and perception. And I feel responsible for joining with compatriots in both promoting and sustaining democratic process in society. Now, how do I do it? More, how do I get myself and my compatriots to do it, and keep doing it?”

Those of us who spend our lives on conceptual and empirical research should have a ready answer (actually a blizzard of ready answers) to this question. This question marks our success, our hoped for achievement in getting through. Now comes the follow through. But handing someone articles on applied ethics, or curricula in service learning or civic engagement won’t fill the bill.

Over the past decade I have been working on three highly practical answers to these questions seeking concrete direction and motivation. One involves developing highly inspiring, practical and learnable problem-solving procedures for making especially detailed and adequate moral choices. I like to think of them as “recipes,” and my approach as “cookbook,” because those terms are so disparaged by ethicists who show no practical or applied acumen whatsoever. These procedures won’t be discussed here.

The two answers I outline for us are first, scientifically formatted experiments in changing ethical traits, beliefs, attitudes commitments or motivations that change practices. Gandhi called such endeavors “experiments in truth.” A more scientific approach was taken by the early psychologist Galton who studied paranoia by systematically imagining that

every event that occurred had him in mind, personally, and studied religious superstition by setting up an altar to Punch and Judy in his rooms, and worshipping them at it.

Second, I describe group research experiments for exposing and combatting perhaps the greatest impediment to pro-democratic citizenship. This is authoritarian submissiveness--the tendency to acquiesce, defer, comply and conform to arbitrary official status and power, and feel that we can't do otherwise, in reputedly democratic contexts. This experiment involves reworking the Adorno, et. al. research on authoritarian personality and right-wing ideology as a classroom project in extra-civic engagement. In steps, we use the study, and our study of its ideological biases, to define authoritarianism. Our self-generated "findings" guide us in trying to identify authoritarianism in our specifically democratic practices. Then we design practices would work directly in opposition to authoritarian ones. This involved my class in creating a new campus religion, a new campus social institution specifically designed to invite defection from an established authoritarian one, and an authoritative fundraising organization that gives itself official authority by simply claiming and exuding such authority. These are extra-civic projects because they do not teach conformity to citizenship roles that are reputed to be democratic when they are not, as in the American context where a Republic supplanted a democracy early on.

(The new religion is democratic, not monarchist, dropping the notion of catering to a lord of the manor who lords it over devotees. The campus institution is mutually self-created and ever-growing with new participants adding their own variations—much as institutions grow on the internet. It is designed to replace oppressive dating rituals such as fraternity mixers. The organization grants permission for a fee for students to perform activities that break the most unpopular and questionable college rules and regulations, based on the wholly

fabricated presumption of authority by our wholly fabricated group. All true democratic authority is a “fabrication” of The People some say.)

*Self-Experiments:* To develop virtues or their components, the metaphor of building a cognitive/computational know-how system or sub-routine was adopted. It operates experimentally by adapting the standard social scientific research format, starting with a literature or observational review, formulating a hypothesis and null-hypothesis, methodological design, gathering and analyzing of results, and finally tracing their implications with an eye to the development of behavioral algorithms. Like Galton, the most active research ingredient used is empathic and self-identified mental concentration combined with repetitive behavioral imitation. Four experimental construction projects were undertaken: (1) *Ego-transcendence*—learning not to identify with oneself so that lush generosity would not require altruism or anything more than typical respect or appreciation; (2) *Friendliness (philiias) programming “for geeks”*—developing a turn-onable/turn-offable personality sub-routine, within introverted personalities, for being genuinely gregarious and charming with others; (3) *Messiah as job category* (or “There is no Messiah and You are It”)—viewing the “path of the One” as a broad ethical job category one can choose to occupy by simply selecting a part of the world to save, rolling up one’s sleeves, and saving it. (This allows moral heroism without excessive conscientiousness or courage.) (4) *Secular Religiosity* (hyper-secular henotheism)—developing the simultaneous ability to be devoutly prayerful toward a serial range of deities while maintaining completely atheistic beliefs (devoid of “supernaturals”) This last combines the virtues of faith and integrity, and faith-affiliation.

*Authoritarian and Democratist Experiments (Research by Design):* The authoritarian personality studies tried to uncover a syndrome linking anti-Semitism with general social prejudice, also with ethnocentric bias or and chauvinism, with right-wing ideology, and with a combination of anti-democratic and harshly totalitarian (fascist) tendencies. Pro-democratic citizenship, however, is principally concerned with the impediments of authoritarian submissiveness and aggressiveness in public life, and with the anti-democratic tendencies of any political ideological or faction. It rests on overcoming them, to allow pro-active democratic process.

Those Adorno (et al) questionnaire items, interview questions, and coding categories that get at these relevant tendencies are found principally on the F-scale and PEC scale. They deal more with political than economic conservatism, however (on the PEC Scale), and with only five of the nine original coding categories for the F Scale. These five concern submissive and aggressive authoritarianism themselves, preference for power and toughness, expressions of conventionalism/compliance, and intolerance for ambiguity or rigid thinking. It is strange that items from economic conservatism were not dropped from the scale when only the PEC failed to correlate with the other scales. Conservative economic beliefs contradict those of political and cultural conservatism as well as authoritarianism. They are for laissez-faire freedom, equality of venture and employment, few government constraints and the like. Here liberalism is far more restrictive and dogmatic, as researchers clearly fail to notice. Dropping these items might have generated predicted correlations. They are dropped in the current research project.

Modern studies, using the Adorno model, have generated items specific to areas of life such as business. My students and I, in a democracy class, took on the same project,

adapting selected F-scale and PEC items to political life, along with selected coding categories, then developing new items, on their model, designed specifically to uncover authoritarianism in democratic practices. The process caused us to suspect authoritarianism in the way political parties select our major candidates for election, the way that the public, The People, must petition their representatives for a voice when public servants should instead be consulting us for direction, with the independent power of a chief executive (the president), functioning as an elected, serial monarch, rather than a prime minister or prime representative of Congress. The parallels between this carryover of monarchist thinking in democratic government and modern religion was striking as well—the idea of a Lord ruling over subjects who try to gain favors and avoid oppression through tribute—“Lead us not into temptation.” Like authoritarian submission was found in public compliance with various social conventions and campus offices.

We drew “democratic authoritarianism” items from popular slogans in part, asking respondents the degree to which respondents agreed or disagreed with the following: “If the people lead, the leaders will follow, and in a democracy they should.” “We should usually question authority to assure it is legitimate and not being abused, as it often has in the past.” “The People of a country should not be intimidated by their own governments, governments should be intimidated by their people.” (The last is a paraphrase from the movie *V is for Vendetta*.) Compare these with traditional F-scale items adapted. “Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn, and strict discipline helps teach them.” “Economic and health security are harmful in society, robbing people of the incentive to work.” “What this country needs more than laws and political programs is a few courageous individuals in whom the people can put their trust and supportively follow.”

“Any religious or political sect that refuses on principle to salute the American flag need not be abolished. “Every person should have complete faith in some supernatural power whose decision he obeys without question.”

We then began piloting these items, probing the social and political rationales behind respondents’ answers. We generated outlooks to oppose high-scoring authoritarian rationales and responses we gathered, substituting highly non-authoritarian ones. These were based also on fundamental, self-identified tenets of democracy—self-government, citizen self-determination, government of, by and for the People, etc. Brainstorming sessions were held to create projects for putting this conceptual opposition into practice and thereby developing habitual attitudes and inclinations in this direction. The “creating our own religion” came out of analyzing the Unitarian “coming of age” curriculum termed “creating your own theology,” researched by several students. Perennial antipathy to the oppressive and sexist nature of fraternity mixers to engage in dating led to the project for creating a more free, fair and egalitarian approach. Our OPOLA (Official Permission Organization League Association) with its hats, sleeve patches, clipboards, letterheads and whistles, was developed to counter arbitrary and restrictive rules set by the campus parking, grounds and safety offices.

Our intention is to draw up a ‘plan of action’ for organizations or individual “organizers” to ferment a similar process in their particular organizational or community context, using a problem like abuse of authority or submission to it as catalyst. We hope to train and supply facilitators from OPOLA to kick off the process for anyone interested.

(As may be obvious, the full course title is “*Anarchism and Democracy.*”)