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The Wooden Doctrine: Basketball, Moral Character, and the Successful Life

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The Wooden Doctrine: Basketball, Moral Character, and the Successful Life

Presented April 16, 2015

Janelle DeWitt, Ph.D.

Papers presented for the Center for the Study of Ethics in Society
Western Michigan University

Vol. XXII No. 4
August, 2016
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Dr. Janelle DeWitt was a Visiting Professor of Philosophy at Western Michigan University when she presented this talk. She is currently a Ruth Norman Halls Postdoctoral Fellow at Indiana University.

Dr. DeWitt earned her doctoral degree in philosophy from UCLA, the same school where John Wooden won 10 NCAA Men's Basketball Championships in 12 years. She is also an avid basketball player and former collegiate athlete.

Her research interests focus primarily on the nature of emotion and the complex role it plays in the development of moral character and its expression in moral action.

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There has always been an understanding that you need a certain sort of character to excel at sports and, conversely, that athletic participation helps to cultivate that character. John Wooden understood this better than most. As with nearly all coaches, his ultimate focus was on success. But what set him apart was his refusal to define success in terms of wins and losses. This may seem odd, even a bit irrational for a coach. After all, isn’t the ultimate goal of any sport to win? Wooden’s insight, however, was that it mattered more how you win, that if you focus on building a strong foundation in the players—i.e., the right character aimed at the right goals—winning will take care of itself. Perhaps even more importantly, he believed that this character was just as important in the game of life as it was in the game of basketball. Wooden often summarized his theory of success in a very simple statement—“peace of mind which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming.”

1 Wooden discussed the motivation behind his theory of success during his TED talk. The transcript can be found at https://www.ted.com/talks/john_wooden_on_the_difference_between_winning_and_success/transcript?language=en. As for his oft quoted sayings, many can be found on his webpage at http://www.coachwooden.com/. Another list of “Woodenisms” can be found at http://hoopsu.com/99-wisdoms-from-wooden/.
better than achieving this kind of success. And without this kind of success, winning is not nearly as satisfying.2

Still, one might think, “Sure, Wooden had a theory of success. But doesn’t every coach? Why should we give his theory any special consideration, especially when it doesn’t seem to correlate directly with winning?” The answer is clear: because Wooden produced overwhelming evidence that there was something special about his theory, that, for the most part, he got it right. Wooden’s tenure at UCLA was the stuff of legend. Prior to his arrival in 1948, UCLA’s program was struggling. It had won only two conference championships in the previous 18 years, and its record the previous year was a paltry 12-13. In his first season, Wooden immediately turned the program around. He won the conference championship and ended with a 22-7 record, the most season wins in UCLA’s history to that point. By the time Wooden left the program in 1975, he had won a staggering 620 games with only 147 losses, a winning percentage of .808. His overall career percentage of .804 (664-162) has been topped, and barely so, by only two other coaches in history (Adolph Rupp .822 and Ken Anderson .806). He brought home ten NCAA national championship titles in his last 12 years, including an unprecedented seven in a row from 1967-1973. (Mike Krzyzewski comes in a distant second with five championships and is one of only a handful to have repeat titles. But to this day, Wooden remains the only coach to have managed a three-peat.) Wooden still holds the NCAA men’s basketball record for the longest winning streak of 88 games. (Phil Woolpert holds the second longest with 60, followed by Wooden again with 47.) He also won 98 straight games on his home court, a record still holding as the third longest. And if this weren’t enough, he also achieved four perfect 30-0 seasons, a feat only three other coaches in history have managed, and those for only one season (Phil

2 As Wooden often noted, “Goals achieved with little effort are seldom worthwhile or lasting.”
Woolpert, Frank McGuire and Bobby Knight). Because of his dominance, he was named NCAA College Basketball's "Coach of the Year" in 1964, 1967, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1972 and 1973. So how does Wooden compare to other coaches? I think the answer is obvious. Even 40 years later, few coaches have come anywhere near his level of achievement on the court, a fact recognized in 2009 when The Sporting News named him the "Greatest Coach of All Time". So when Wooden gives us the doctrine for success that made this all possible, we should listen.

But what, exactly, is this "Wooden doctrine"? First and foremost, it is a fundamental reorientation away from winning. If your aim, as an athlete or student, focuses on winning and losing, on the points on the board, or the letter grades on your papers, then you are missing the point. You are focusing on the end result, rather than on the means to get there. Instead, Wooden thought we should focus on the journey to that end result—on the hard work and effort to get to that final game score or to get that A grade. If you do your best in preparing for any competition or activity, then your journey will be successful, regardless of the final results. To put this another way, you should define success only in relation to yourself—to be the best you can be and trust that your best will be good enough (while also accepting when it is not). When you focus on the final score, you in-

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3 On the women's side, UConn's Geno Auriemma is the only coach to surpass Wooden's achievements. His overall winning percentage at the end of the 2015-16 season was .877. He also beat Wooden's 10 championship titles by winning his 11th in 2016, and he won his 90th straight game late in 2010. Auriemma also had six perfect seasons, with six other coaches achieving at least one such season.

4 The facts referenced here about Wooden's life and career are widely cited. But most can be found on his personal webpage or at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Wooden.

5 In 2016, The Sporting News updated its rankings of the 50 greatest coaches of all time. Wooden retained his rightful position at the top of this impressive list. http://www.sportingnews.com/other-sports/list/greatest-coaches-wooden-lombardi-jackson-bryant-krzyzewski-pat-summitt/51a0zndczflw1nj2z2m4vckas
stead define success in relation to others—to be merely “better than everyone else”.

This subtle difference in the orientation of success and how it is measured has, I believe, profound implications. A failure to be your own standard of success can be detrimental to you in at least two significant ways. First, it creates a strong tendency towards mediocrity (or something slightly above it) because underneath all the self-deception, you are really only aiming to be just good enough to win, or just a little bit better than everyone else, whether or not you are capable of more. You might win every game, but if you could have achieved true greatness by, for example, breaking every rebounding or scoring record on the books, you will still have cheated yourself out of a certain degree of success. But with this focus, it also becomes more unlikely that you will win every game because inevitably there will be a team that surprises you by outperforming your expectations. So if you train to be just good enough to beat those expectations, you will be unprepared and you will lose. In contrast, Wooden believed that when you focus instead on being the best that you can be, i.e., on the maximal development of your own skill set and conditioning, you will always be prepared. If you still lose, you lose with a certain degree of respect for yourself in successfully elevating your play to its absolute best, and you lose with a certain degree of respect for your opponents knowing they beat you even though you were playing at your very best. However, if you lose from a lack of preparation, you will inevitably have less respect for your opponents and for yourself.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, a relative standard of success fosters an inclination to cheat, or to sacrifice other important core values, all in the name of winning. After all, if all that really matters is winning, then how you win becomes irrelevant. Sometimes cheating is the easiest way, sometimes it is the only way. And the stronger the desire to win is, the stronger the temptation will be to vi
olate the rules of the game in order to guarantee that win. In contrast, when you measure success against the maximal development of your own natural potential, how you win becomes the central focus, and in doing so, it provides a check against this temptation. Why? Because you cannot cheat your way to achieving this goal. Only hard work and determination can get you there. Not only does cheating not help, it actually hinders the progress because it often replaces hard work, thus leaving your natural talents undeveloped (which is the very standard by which you are measuring your success). So on this standard of success, cheating is much less tempting because you realize that the person harmed most by your cheating is you.

Not surprisingly, Wooden didn’t just preach about this doctrine. He lived by this belief. In fact, his players can’t recall him ever placing any importance on winning. His focus was always on the fundamentals, and the character needed to develop those fundamentals. Winning and losing were byproducts of that preparation. Maximal preparation, achieved by working hard to develop one’s own potential, was always the primary goal.

So the Wooden Doctrine is, essentially, a set of 15 character traits necessary for maximal development and preparation, arranged into the form of a pyramid—what is now known as the Pyramid of Success. The building blocks of the pyramid are traits such as industriousness, friendship, loyalty, cooperation, enthusiasm, self-control, alertness, initiative, intentness, condition (mental-moral-physical), skill, team spirit, poise, and confidence. The block capping it all off is competitive greatness, which he defines as “being at your best when your best is needed,” while also noting that your best is required each day. These blocks are flanked on each side by ambition, adaptability, resourcefulness, fight, integrity, reliability, honesty, and sincerity, with faith and patience at the top keeping watch over competitive greatness. Each of these traits, but in particular competitive greatness, he saw as being just as important in life as in basketball, because
they are the traits that will help prepare you to handle whatever life throws your way and to help you excel at whatever it is you choose to do.

Wooden's doctrine for success seemed revolutionary when first proposed and still does to some extent today, and his pyramid of success is the material for many corporate seminars on leadership. (In fact, my sister met Wooden at one of these seminars just before he died.) Yet, at the heart of his doctrine is a philosophical theory nearly 2500 years old. In fact, a great deal of coaching and training philosophy can be traced back to Aristotle, an Ancient Greek philosopher whose moral theory is still covered in most introductory ethics classes taught today. The problem is, many don't recognize it. Consider, for example, hard work and determination. Wooden emphasized the importance of these traits by making them the cornerstones of his pyramid. The idea is captured in the slogan nearly every athlete, musician, or artist has heard before—"practice makes perfect." Coaches often correct this, saying "perfect practice makes perfect." The slogan is so pervasive that it has even found its way into an Under Amour advertisement narrated by Jaime Foxx, one in which Foxx attempts to improve upon it even more.

You know the great philosopher Aristotle said, "You are what you repeatedly do." But in our book, we take it a little deeper. We say you are what you repeatedly do when things get hard. When things get hard, legacies are built on those moments. When you look at the nay-sayers and the haters, and there's a million of them. But you take it upon yourself to erase all doubt. Get that doubt outta here. So my apologies to Aristotle, but excellence doesn't become a habit by running the same path over and over. No, no, no, no! You know what the excellent ones do? They reinvent the race all together. The ex-
Tell me if this sounds familiar.

Virtues of character result from habit...None of the virtues arises in us naturally...rather, we acquire them just as we acquire crafts...for we learn a craft by producing the same product that we must produce when we have learned it; we become builders by building, and we become harpists by playing the harp. Similarly, then, we become just by doing just actions, and temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions.

So far, Mr. Foxx seems to be right. But! Aristotle continues...

Further, the sources and means that develop each virtue also ruin it, just as they do in a craft. For playing the harp makes both good and bad harpists, and it is analogous in the case of builders and all the rest; for building well makes good builders, and building badly makes bad ones....It is the same, then, with the virtues. For what we do in our dealings with other people make some of us just, some unjust; what we do in terrifying situations, and the habits of fear and confidence that we acquire, make some of us brave and others cowardly. The same is true of situations involving the appetites and anger; for one or another sort of conduct in these situations make some temperate and mild, others intemperate and irascible. To sum it up in a single account: a state of character results from the repetition of similar activities. That is why we must perform the right activities, since differences in these imply cor-

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6 Under Armour: “Erase All Doubt”. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ck7frxs-Uc
responding differences in the states. It is not unimportant, then, to acquire one sort of habit or another, right from our youth. On the contrary, it is very important, indeed all-important.” (Nicomachean Ethics, Book II, Chapter I, italics added).

So with all due respect Mr. Foxx, Aristotle did not get excellence wrong, Under Armour got Aristotle wrong!

Aristotle was one of the first to articulate this important idea—that we become who we are by the actions we engage in and the way we engage in them, by what we do and how/why we choose to do it. Just as we become a good builder by repeatedly building well, or a hard worker by repeatedly working hard, we become courageous by repeatedly acting courageously in terrifying situations. The result is a certain sort of character constituted by the particular traits we chose to cultivate. And this idea is the essence of virtue-ethics, a character-based theory of morality. But at this point, the obvious question to ask is “what does morality have to do with sports?” When we think of morality, we tend to think of it as a list of prohibitions, or a set of obligations that most of us would rather ignore—they are burdensome, restrictive, and even at times boring. But Aristotle’s theory takes a radically different view. Morality aims at what he calls (in Ancient Greek) eudaimonia—a term often translated as “the good life”, or “human flourishing”. The good life is a life that goes the best it possibly can. It is a life in which we, as human beings, can be said to be flourishing, to be genuinely happy, to be satisfied, or to be complete. As it turns out, the virtues are what help us to achieve this life. Regardless of what talents, gifts, circumstances, or resources we happen to have, the virtues are what help us to make the most of them, and of what life has to offer us. Even when we grow up in poverty or continually face seemingly insurmountable challenges (whether it be a health crisis, financial ruin, being a victim of violence, or in the case
of basketball, a severe injury or a devastating loss), the virtues help us to overcome this adversity. As I often tell my students, the virtues are what allow us to make lemonade out of life’s lemons. When we develop the virtues, we are in the best position to make our lives go as well as possible, to succeed against the odds, and to make the most out of what life has given to us. Sound familiar? This is how Wooden described competitive spirit, the capstone of his pyramid—"being at your best when your best is needed," knowing that your best will be needed each day—and you put yourself in this position by developing the character traits needed to fully be at your best. It appears then that true competitive spirit requires good character, i.e., moral virtue.

What, then, are these virtues, and how exactly do they help us to achieve the good life? Several Aristotelian virtues are quite familiar. They include (among others) courage, temperance, and honesty. And at this point, we know that they are dispositions to act well developed through habituation to good actions. But this very general statement can be misleading, as Mr. Foxx can attest to, because it suggests that virtue involves a mindless repetition of learned behavior. If that’s the case, then it would be hard to see what could make the virtues so special, or what it is about them that would help us to achieve the good life. However, this is decidedly not what Aristotle had in mind. Instead, virtue involves having a certain sort of knowledge (contained in both our thoughts and our feelings) about the good, a kind of knowledge that helps us to determine the best course of action to take in any given situation. Without this knowledge, we are unable to live the best possible life we can. Take the virtue of courage. A courageous person is one who understands what is actually dangerous, when it is good to face that danger, how to best face that danger, and why it is good to face it. He understands that a fire consuming one’s house poses a genuine threat. But he also recognizes that, though he may be ill-equipped, he must face that fire when his child is trapped inside. Even so, he doesn’t just rush in, but
takes a moment to gather what he can to protect himself and his child. And if he hears sirens rounding the corner to his house, he knows it is best to stand down and let the professionals take over. In contrast, a rash or cowardly person (the two associated vices) will fail in at least one of these dimensions. A rash person will tend to ignore the danger that the fire poses and rush in for the rescue, even if the professionals, who are better equipped to protect his child, are merely seconds away. A coward will tend to be paralyzed by his fear and unable to help his child, even if the fire has yet to engulf the house. So it is the courageous person who will tend to be the most likely to save his child without injury to himself or the child—the best possible outcome.

And finally, though virtue involves having a complete knowledge of the good, it still requires skill in putting that knowledge into practice. This is why the virtues cannot just be taught in a classroom. Instead, they require training, or habituation, because it is through repeatedly confronting fearful things that we learn how to fear correctly—that is, to fear the right things, at the right time, for the right end, and in the right way. So in the end, we see that a virtuous person is essentially a person in his most optimal state, one in which he is functioning at his very best. So contrary to Mr. Foxx’s assertion, virtue is a form of excellence—it is the distinctively human excellence.

So the moral virtues are what help you to attain the good life. The question remaining is: Can they also help you to win basketball games? Wooden clearly thought so, because he believed that a good character, including a good moral character, was the best foundation on which to develop the particular skills needed to succeed at the game. This is why each of the traits he selected for his pyramid either has a clear moral dimension to it, or is a moral virtue in its own right. In fact, he even includes moral conditioning along with that of physical and mental because he recognized the interdependence of the three. If, for example, you are mentally weak, you will not have the drive to train hard enough to achieve peak physical conditioning. Or
if you don’t have enough self-control with respect to, say, the amount and type of food you consume (the virtue of temperance), your mental and physical strength will suffer. Wooden often reminded his players of the importance of all three aspects of conditioning with a little rhyme, one that clearly indicated he was putting forth a virtue-ethic of his own: “There is a choice you have to make, in everything you do. So keep in mind that in the end, the choice you make makes you.”

Wooden also understood that he couldn’t selectively choose among the moral traits only those that he might find useful, because focusing on those traits alone would ultimately result in failure. Instead, his players needed a well-developed and well-rounded character overall. More specifically, they needed to be honest, sincere, loyal, respectful (of themselves and of others), and even compassionate (“team spirit” highlights the value of basic altruism—a genuine consideration for others and a willingness to sacrifice for the good of all) because these character traits are intertwined with other traits such as fight, self-control, and sportsmanship. This is a point known in the ancient theory as the “unity of virtue”—to fully have the one virtue, you must have them all. Why? Because they all represent aspects of a single life—the good life—and so they are all forms of knowledge about how that life ought to be lived. More specifically, they are forms of knowledge whose significance is determined by their proper relationship to the other virtues.

In conclusion, we see that there is a great deal of similarity between Wooden’s theory of the successful life and Aristotle’s theory of the good life. Wooden understood that the character traits he selected transcended the game—they were elements necessary for success in all aspects of his players’ lives. Coaches and players who fail to understand this, who focus on winning directly, might achieve some success, but it will be temporary or episodic because they are more dependent on fortuitous circumstances for their success. But Wooden achieved the amazing: 10 NCAA Men’s basketball titles his last 12
years of coaching and four years of a perfect, undefeated record. That kind of consistent success requires more; it requires the ability to transcend one's circumstances and to determine one's own success, an ability that only a strong moral character can provide.
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Matthew K. Wynia
The Institute for Ethics and the Center for Patient Safety, American Medical Association
VOLUME XX

Journey of Peace Journalist
No. 1, March 2013
Robert Koehler
Chicago-based syndicated journalist

VOLUME XXI

Anorexia/Bulimia, Transcendence, and the Potential Impact of Romanticized/Sexualized Death Imagery
No. 1, November 2014
Heather D. Schild
Department of Sociology

VOLUME XXII

Vulnerability, Preventability, and Responsibility: Exploring Some Normative Implications of the Human Condition
No. 1, September 2015
Daniel Wueste
Rutland Institute for Ethics, Clemson University

The Germans and Their Nazi Past:
To What Extent Have They Accepted Responsibility?
No. 2, April 2016
Martin Hille
University of Passau (Germany)

CRISPR Humans: Ethics at the Edge of Science
No. 3, August 2016
Insoo Hyun
Case Western Reserve University, School of Medicine
Spring 2015 Lecture Series

"Social Justice and the Emerging New Age: A 21st Century Look at Martin Luther King's WMU Speech"
4 p.m. Monday, January 26
159 Bernhard Center
Dustin Van Pelt, Dustin Sigsbee, Michael Lindquist, Katherine Ruff, Philosophy, Western Michigan University

"Responding to Gendered Violence in Society, Law and on College Campuses: From 1991 to Today"
7 p.m. Tuesday, February 3
Chenery Auditorium
Anita Hill, Attorney and Professor of Social Policy, Law and Women's Studies, Brandeis University
Main Sponsor: Lee Honors College

"Peace Education and the U.S. Public School: Embracing Global Citizenship Prior to World War I"
7 p.m. Tuesday, February 10
Winnie Veenstra Peace Lecture, 2028 Brown Hall
Hope Elizabeth May, Philosophy, Central Michigan University
Co-Sponsors: Department of Teaching, Learning, and Educational Studies and Kalamazoo Non-Violent Opponents of War (KNOW)

"Professional Ethics in Challenging Times"
7 p.m. Wednesday, February 25
President's Dining Room, Bernhard Center
Norman Hawker, College of Business, WMU; Michael Pritchard, Philosophy, WMU; Victoria Vuletich, WMU Cooley Law School
Co-Sponsor: WMU Cooley Law School

"Vulnerability, Preventability, and Responsibility: Exploring Some Normative Implications of the Human Condition"
4 p.m. Tuesday, March 17
159 Bernhard Center
Dan Wueste, Director, Robert J. Rutland Institute for Ethics, Clemson University

The Insider
Special movie screening
5 p.m. 1028 Brown Hall
“Inside the Tobacco Industry”
7 p.m. Tuesday, April 7
Kirsch Auditorium, Fetzer Center
Jeffrey Wigand, Founder, Smoke-Free Kids
Co-Sponsors: Haworth College of Business, Lee Honors College, Bronson School of Nursing, University Center for the Humanities, School of Communication

“The Wooden Doctrine: Basketball, Moral Character, and the Successful Life”
4 p.m. Thursday, April 16
Brown & Good Room, Bernhard Center
Janelle DeWitt, Philosophy, Western Michigan University
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