

Fundamental Elements of Vocation¹

The term vocation, as David S. Cunningham describes in the introduction to *Vocation Across the Academy* is “capacious, dynamic, and elastic”. This is an important feature of vocation for NetVUE member institutions, because it allows them to align the language to the mission, values, traditions, and language of their own institution. However, vocation can be defined as *so very* “capacious, dynamic, and elastic” that it can come to mean anything at all. In many quarters, the concepts of vocation and calling are recast as the process of discerning “a life of meaning and purpose,” of “living a flourishing life,” or of bringing about “happiness and the good life.” While each of these approaches bears a family resemblance to vocation, they all need further specification to prevent them from becoming something very different indeed. It is therefore important, as we work with institutions, to have in our minds the specific features of vocation and calling that distinguish these concepts from some of the approaches that can arise from alternative formulations.

(1) Includes Others (a caller that is something outside of us)

In the enlarged and more capacious understanding of vocation, the word retains its connection to the Latin verb *vocare*, insisting that the “call” be understood as having some kind of external dimension—a “caller” of one sort or another, an agency outside of one’s own self, encouraging us to venture outside of our self-absorption and our purely internal focus on our own self-determination. This caller may be “God” in the traditional sense of the Abrahamic faiths, or it may be some other being or entity or force considered to be divine; but it can also be another human being, a circumstance that has commanded our attention, or even a more general sense of “the needs of the world.” In spite of this wide variation, however, the call is always something more than a merely internal voice or a subjective decision to move in one direction or another; something outside of the self is drawing us out of ourselves and summoning us to focus our attention on *something that is not us*. A focus on vocation means recognizing our interdependence on vast networks of thought and action that originate outside of ourselves, and to which we respond: an outwardly-originated, inwardly-experienced “pull” from beings and entities and forces over which we do not have comprehensive control. To live vocationally is to live what some have described as “a responsive life,” “a summoned life,” or “a life of genuinely paying attention.”

(2) Considers Formation

Vocation has a moral character. If a calling implies a caller (or perhaps a great many of them), then we must be in a position to evaluate the intentions of the caller. Is this “other” oriented *for* us or *against* us? Are we being drawn into something that serves that which is true, good, and beautiful? Or are we being called into thoughts, actions, and ways of life that are damaging to ourselves and to others, habituating us in bad behaviors that we may later find difficult to escape? For this reason, discussions of vocation have often been associated with the ancient accounts of virtue and vice. The virtues and vices are habits—habits that eventually become such a part of our lives, such an “automatic” response to whatever situation we encounter, that other people begin to associate them regularly with our behavior and to see them as character traits. A person becomes just, or courageous, or wise, not just by “learning” about these virtues, but by doing things that exemplify these virtues, over and over again, until “deciding” to do these things seems like the obvious course of action—that is, not really a “decision” at all. A life lived according to the virtues is a life of true happiness as described by that ancient word *eudaimonia*: not merely a temporary emotional feeling, but the extended contentment enjoyed throughout a genuinely good life: a fulfilled and fulfilling life.

¹ Adapted from the introduction to the first issue of *Studies in Vocation and Calling* by David S. Cunningham. For more, also see the introduction to *Vocation Across the Academy*.

(3) Requires Community

Because of this need to discern and to evaluate, morally, the various “calls” that we hear, vocation requires us to do this discernment in the presence of, and with input from, other people. As Aristotle noted long ago, we only come to understand the moral standards by which we judge things—that is, we only know how to recognize what kinds of behavior exemplify the virtues and the vices—through the communities within which we live. The moral nature of vocational discernment, along with the communal basis of morality, means that exploring and discerning one’s vocation cannot be undertaken in isolation. We need to be in conversation with others in order to discern whether the voices that seem to be calling us are doing so in our best interests (and in the best interests of the world at large). Only through conversation with others can we begin to sort out the diversity (and sometimes the cacophony) of voices that seem to be calling to us. We need other people to help us get a perspective on the thoughts, actions, and forms of life to which we are being called.

(4) Involves Agency for Action

A vocational approach to life and thought emphasizes the necessity of combining contemplation and action. At the end of his treatise on ethics, Aristotle reviews the arguments for and against a contemplative life vis-à-vis a life of action. In the end he favors the contemplative life—a perspective that has drawn a great deal of criticism. But the concept of vocation doesn’t really allow these two perspectives to be set up in opposition to each other. Yes, exploring and discerning one’s calling does require contemplation; it is not merely one more choice to be made during a day full of hurried and harried decisions. Instead, it demands a certain amount of dedicated time, and a free and ordered space, within which such exploration and discernment can occur. But the whole point of that work of exploration and discernment is not simply to keep on contemplating, but rather to put the results into action. This means actually taking up the callings to which we have been called—and living into them to the best of our ability. Our vocations call us to a life of contemplation *and* a life of action, and we live our lives more completely when we understand the necessity of both.

(5) Leads to Practice over the Long Haul

Vocation has an extended character: it is not merely focused on a momentary, once-for-all decision, but is something that takes place over the long haul. Vocational exploration and discernment are lifelong practices; as we move through life, we shift and change, and this requires us to return to the exploration and discernment process again and again, to consider whether our present selves are discerning the same call that shaped our selves in the past. This temporal extension of vocation can be expanded to encompass a spatial extension as well: it is not restricted to a certain portion of society, as might have been the case in some of the past uses of the words *vocation* and *calling*. It is not restricted to those entering religious life; it is not focused only on trades, as the language of “vocational education” sometimes suggests; it is not only about one’s working life, but ranges into the domestic, civic, and leisure spheres as well; and it is not only for the “creative class” or another societal caste or division that happens to have enough spare time to explore and discern a future direction in life. In short, *vocation is for everyone*: rich or poor, young or old, majority or minority, liberal or conservative, credentialed or otherwise. Vocation moves in the opposite direction: every single human being has a calling—indeed a variety of callings. And all people should have the opportunity to exercise a degree of vocational vigilance—continuing to explore and discern and reflect on their callings, so that everyone might have a chance to live a fulfilled and fulfilling life.

If you need a shorthand to remember these elements, consider: **Formation by Others in Community providing Agency over the Long haul (FOCAL)!**