The Intellectual Goals of Character Education

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INTRODUCTION

The ancient concept of "virtue" has received renewed attention in philosophy since Elizabeth Anscombe's famous critique of "modern moral philosophy."[1] According to Anscombe, the moral theory of her day had become preoccupied with defining right or good action; instead, she advocated a retrieval of moral character, or virtue, in ethics. Today, the central claim of virtue ethics is that the moral domain should be understood not in terms of what makes actions right or wrong, but rather in terms of the moral character of the actor. Somewhat later than in ethics, a similar current of thought emerged in epistemology. Virtue epistemologists, such as Ernest Sosa,[2] Lorraine Code,[3] Linda Zagzebski,[4] and others, have argued that the field of epistemology has become overly occupied with the analysis of knowledge and, in particular, with stipulating conditions under which beliefs are to count as justified. Just as virtue ethics turns its attention away from moral action to moral character, so virtue epistemology focuses on the character of the good or responsible knower, rather than the nature of rational or justified belief.

The influence of virtue *ethics* on the philosophy of education and on educational practice is well-established. A curious feature of what has become known as the "character education movement," however, is its preoccupation with the virtues of moral character. Certainly, the "go to" theory underpinning character education programmes in the USA, the UK, and other Anglophone contexts is a version of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics.[5] While research on the link between intellectual virtue and education is growing,[6] there is little advocacy of the idea that the character education movement should model itself on virtue epistemology rather on virtue ethics. This is strange when one considers that the landscape of schooling is more often associated with intellectual than with moral development. Indeed, given the contested nature of morality in contemporary society, many express unease regarding proselytising forms of character education and would prefer, instead, that schools focus on the comparatively less politically contentious matter of teaching academic subjects (and leave morality for parents, churches, community groups, etc.).

In this article, I consider the prospects for an alternative position: that character education in school should model itself on the inculcation of intellectual rather than moral character. First, I consider the relationship between intellectual and moral virtue. Second, I propose three arguments to the effect that the proper task of schools is the promotion of intellectual, not moral, virtue.

INTELLECTUAL AND MORAL VIRTUE

Contemporary forms of virtue ethics and – to a lesser extent – virtue epistemology take their inspiration from Aristotle's theory of the virtues.[7] Aristotle identifies two broad categories of virtue: intellectual and moral virtue. For Aristotle, the two forms of virtue are distinguished in terms of whether they belong to the "rational"

or "desiring" part of the soul.[8] Furthermore, Aristotle draws a distinction between how moral and intellectual virtues are acquired. For Aristotle, the intellectual virtues are given by nature, even though they can be improved through teaching. Full moral virtue, by contrast, is not given by nature, but is improved through practice.[9]

Baehr considers the relationship between intellectual and moral virtue and holds that there are three possible ways to conceive of the relationship:

1. the intellectual virtues are just moral virtues;

2. the intellectual virtues are a particular sub-set of the moral virtues;

3. the intellectual virtues are different from the moral virtues.[10]

Now, if the intellectual and moral virtues are the same, any claim that the aims of character education should be the inculcation of intellectual rather than moral virtue would be a non-starter (because there would be no difference between the two). For this reason, the first important step is to establish whether there is enough difference between the two kinds of virtue to warrant placing an emphasis on one rather than the other.

The most prominent defence of the idea that the moral and intellectual virtues are the *same* is provided by Zagzebski,[11] who begins by criticizing Aristotle's view that intellectual virtue belongs to the rational and that moral virtue belongs to the non-rational part of the soul.[12] Zagzebski is not alone in finding this way of drawing the distinction between the two kinds of virtue wanting. She sets out how, for Aristotle, the *function* of the moral virtues is to regulate feeling, especially feelings of pleasure and pain; however, it is not clear that all moral virtues have this function. Take the moral virtue of kindness, for example. It is not clear that the purpose of kindness is to overcome any particular feeling of pleasure or pain; kindness does not amount simply to overcoming the temptation to be unkind. Conversely, it is clear that there are intellectual virtues that are to do with tempering feeling. Plausibly, intellectual sobriety or prudence has much to do with tempering negative intellectual feelings, such as intellectual frustration, confusion, etc.[13]

Next, Zagzebski turns to Aristotle's thought that intellectual virtue is acquired through teaching, and moral virtue is acquired through imitation and practice. She argues that this account will not work either, and points out that there are intellectual virtues that one cannot be taught directly, e.g. open-mindedness. It is also easy to imagine moral virtues that do require at least some teaching, e.g. justice. But Zagzebski goes further and stresses the similarities between moral and intellectual virtue. Both forms of virtue:

•   require training and practice;

•   involve handling and mastering feelings;

•   and are acquired in stages.[14]

For these reasons, Zagzebski holds that the intellectual virtues *are* merely moral virtues.

Baehr disagrees.[15] He admits that a number of conventional ways of drawing the distinction between the intellectual and moral virtues are unworkable. One way

to explain why the intellectual virtues and the moral virtues are distinct is via the idea that the intellectual virtues are excellences in the formation of belief, while the moral virtues are excellences in the domain of (moral) action. Baehr dismisses this view. He points out that thinking is also a kind of action (thinking, after all, involves gathering evidence, deciding, judging, etc.) and, for this reason, the intellectual virtues bear on both belief and action.[16] Another possibility is that the moral virtues "aim at moral ends," while the epistemic virtues aim at epistemic ends. Baehr similarly dismisses this view. The reason is twofold. First, the moral ends themselves are so diverse. Baehr mentions a number of plausible ends of moral action - pleasure, autonomy, justice, love, etc. - and adopting any one of these rather than another would yield a very different picture of what "morality" is.[17] Second, epistemic ends may themselves, given the right description, appear moral or "other-regarding," that is, aimed at the wellbeing of others.[18] Take, for instance, the person who is intellectually generous in sharing their knowledge with others, a generosity that clearly benefits not only the person themselves, but also others.

Baehr's own position is that the intellectual and moral virtues are distinct (although there is an overlap between *some* of the intellectual virtues and the class of moral virtues). To support this, Baehr advances the argument that it is possible to be intellectually virtuous while being morally vicious. One may easily imagine (or may perhaps know!) people who are intellectually curious, rigorous in inquiry, inventive in theory, etc., but who are still morally uncaring, for instance. It is equally easy to imagine someone who is morally virtuous but intellectually vicious; for instance, someone may be sweet and kind, but intellectually dull and sloppy. Indeed, one may go further than Baehr and point out that the *very same virtue* may be a moral virtue and an epistemic vice at the same time. Take the example of a virtue such as "respect." We quite understand why respecting others' moral, political, or scientific views is an important moral virtue. It is an important component of taking them seriously as individuals and of creating a society in which individuals have freedom of conscience. What, though, of the situation in which another person's views are *false* or *bad*? Morally, we can see why one has reason to respect the freedom of a person, say, to express their view that smoking tobacco is not harmful to one's health. However, epistemically speaking, we know that the vast bulk of the scientific evidence shows that smoking is thoroughly bad for one's health. In such a case, I would suggest, respect is a moral virtue, but an epistemic vice.

Julia Driver provides, I think, the best way to conceive of the relationship between moral and intellectual virtue. Driver distinguishes between moral and epistemic virtue on the level of the motivation that drives one to exhibit these virtues (compare Baehr's account, above). On this view, moral virtue is motivated by something like the quest for human wellbeing, and intellectual virtue is motivated by the search for truth. A different way to put the point is that moral virtues are essentially "other-regarding." They focus on securing goods for others. This is in distinction to the intellectual virtues that are thought to be "self-regarding" (because, in thinking, one is thought to derive goods, e.g. truths, clever ideas, etc., that mainly benefit oneself.) Baehr holds that, on Driver's account, we have no way to accommodate the insight

that the intellectual virtues can be other-regarding; put differently, we must see the intellectual virtues as fundamentally egotistical. This is not how Driver sees the matter, however. She only holds that the intellectual virtues produce fundamentally *epistemic* goods; these goods can be for oneself or for another. For Driver, rather than focusing on what motivates someone to exhibit the different virtues in question, we should distinguish between intellectual and moral virtue in terms of the goods that they produce.[19] Driver holds that the good produced by intellectual virtue is knowledge, and the good produced by moral virtue is the wellbeing of others.[20]

Driver considers the objection that intellectual virtue also contributes to the well-being of others. Most obviously, if one person makes an interesting discovery and communicates it, this benefits many people, not only that person him/herself. Driver explains that, even if intellectual virtues may contribute to wellbeing, this does not necessarily make it their characteristic or essential function.[21] Take the following example. Assume that all great art produces pleasure in those who see it. Even though all great art is a pleasure to behold, Driver argues, this does not necessarily mean that the *point* of the art is to produce pleasure; what it is that makes the art great can be something other than the pleasure it gives (e.g. its artistic value). As such, even though much, or even all, intellectual activity may benefit others, its value as intellectual activity may still consist in something else, i.e. the production of knowledge.

Following Driver, we should see intellectual and moral virtue as being properly distinct, because the *goods* that the two kinds of virtue aim at are distinct. The fact that part of what one aims at in forming knowledge is to be able to inform others of something, does not turn the whole epistemic enterprise into a moral one. While there are, of course, deeply interesting and important touchpoints between epistemology and ethics, one's testimonial responsibilities to another still admit of epistemic evaluation that is independent of moral evaluation.

Intellectual Virtue and the Aims of Character Education

Above we saw that, contrary to Zagzebski's view, intellectual and moral virtue are, indeed, properly distinct. This is important because establishing that intellectual and moral character are different clears the way for the argument that the aim of character education at school level should be intellectual, and not moral, virtue.

A number of well-known objections to character education in the literature exist: for example, that it focuses on the wrong virtues;[22] that it is not the business of schools;[23] and that it is ineffectual.[24] Recently, Kristjánsson summarized ten objections to character education in schools. In particular, Kristjánsson concedes that character education in schools is sometimes seen as:

- paternalistic;
- anti-democratic and anti-intellectual;
- conservative;
- and individualistic.[25]

As Baehr (2013) puts it, one of the most important objections to moral character education is that it relies on controversial notions of morality that are out of place in

public education. For those interested in character education, an obvious alternative is for schools to focus on the (comparatively non-controversial) intellectual virtues in their efforts. Baehr writes:

> intellectual character education" as we might call it, sidesteps one of the main objections raised against more traditional approaches to character education. Some object to these approaches on the grounds that they rely on controversial notions of morality that are out of place in public education. This objection has little force against the attempt to educate for intellectual virtues … [I]ntellectual virtues are the character traits required for good thinking and learning. They presuppose no controversial moral commitments.[26]

While this is a promising thought, Baehr is too sanguine about the controversiality of teaching for the intellectual virtues. What intellectual character traits we should educate for in schools is not an entirely neutral matter; it can be as controversial as moral character education. Take the intellectual virtue of open-mindedness as an example. While scientifically- and liberally-minded parents, educationists, and policy-makers see open-mindedness as one of the most important intellectual virtues that a good school education can provide, some parents (especially those from some religious groups) actively object to schools encouraging open-mindedness in children when it comes to core religious notions. Rather than open-mindedness, such parents would prefer that schools promote faith and acceptance – even humility! – regarding these notions. This illustrates that, *contra* to what Baehr holds, education for intellectual virtue also involves controversial commitments, and that intellectual character education does not sidestep this problem.

Can we identify stronger arguments as to why schools should focus on intellectual, rather than on moral, virtue in character education? The following three arguments offer more traction than the argument of controversiality.

I. Any debate regarding the proper aims of character education will trace again the outlines of the debate regarding the proper aims of education in the round. One can distinguish between education's function as – for instance – a moral, political, economic, and epistemic enterprise, and considerable attention has been given to which of these functions is central. The most obvious reason to see the epistemic aim of education as the most important is the centrality of the development of *reason* as an educational aim.[27] Surely, even if one accepts that the aim of education is to form moral persons, good citizens, or good workers, the role that formal education plays in doing this is of creating moral actors, citizens, or workers who are *rational* and *reasonable*, that is, who can think autonomously about action in these domains and who can be held responsible to rational standards in these domains.

According to Siegel, the most fundamental aim of education should be the fostering of rational or critical thinking.[28] Siegel offers three reasons why this is the case. First, on a broadly Kantian view, the fundamental principle of ethics is to treat individuals with respect as persons. This demands that teachers treat students with due respect in their teaching, which, in turn, demands that teaching takes the form of rational explanation that is designed to convince (rather than to force belief). Second, the aim of education should be – quite generally – to prepare children for their life as adults in which they play an autonomous and equal role in society. In

order to play this equal and autonomous role, children need to learn skills of rational investigation, discourse, debate, and decision – in short, critical thinking skills. Third, Siegel holds that, in order to play the sort of autonomous and equal role envisaged, children need to be initiated into reasoning in and communicating within our central cultural traditions (such as science, literature, history, art, mathematics, etc.). Because these traditions are not static, but constantly grow and evolve, the only way to take part in them is by acquiring the skills of rational thinking that enable one to evaluate and propose claims in these areas.[29]

As we saw, Siegel's third justification of critical thinking as the aim of education is that it is the form of thinking that is needed to enter into certain important traditions in our culture. One of these is the academic domain of ethics (as opposed to the practical one of "practicing ethics"). If one is to become an autonomous discussant in our society's ethical conversation, it is not enough that one simply become habituated in the kinds of action that are considered moral. While becoming habituated into moral virtue may equip children to lead a moral life, this alone will neither equip children to take part in a moral conversation nor (more importantly) to be in a position to advance that conversation. Taking part in such debate calls for the possession of discursive intellectual virtues such as accuracy, respect for evidence, reasonableness, open-mindedness, (intellectual) honesty, (intellectual) courage etc. This is a first reason why education at school level should model itself on the acquisition of intellectual, rather than moral, virtue.

II. Above, it was held that school-based character education programmes should be concerned with inculcating intellectual, rather than moral, virtue, because the *point of all forms of education should be to foster intellectual autonomy*. To some, it may seem strange that a set of arguments that are essentially *Kantian* are cited in the context of character education, which is more often associated with Aristotle. One may, of course, respond that Kant was equally a scholar of character;[30] however, it is possible to demonstrate the same point from an Aristotelian point of view.

Even on an Aristotelian view of character education, the inculcation of the moral virtues alone is not sufficient to ensure that a moral actor does what is good or right. In Aristotle's system of ethics, the moral virtues such as honesty, kindness, justice, courage, etc., do not by themselves prepare the moral actor for moral action. According to Aristotle, while the moral virtues ensure that we aim at the correct goal in moral action, it requires a form of practical moral know-how to realize those goals. This is *phronesis*. For Aristotle, *phronesis* is wisdom in the domain of *praxis* (that is, practical moral action) rather than in the domain of *episteme* (or science). *Phronesis* fulfils two cardinal roles in Aristotle's virtue ethics. First, it completes the moral virtues in that it provides the practical know how needed to turn virtue into successful action. Second, it enables the moral actor to weigh up the importance of the competing goals that they themselves (or others) may have in any moral situation.[31] Importantly, *phronesis* is an intellectual virtue for Aristotle, not a moral virtue.

As Daniel Russell explains, *phronesis* in Aristotle has four dimensions.[32] First, *phronesis* has to do with having "comprehension" (*sunesis* or *eusunesis*): this is the ability to recognize the morally important features of a situation and to assess

what is important to achieve in such a situation. Second, *phronesis* requires good sense (*gnome*): this is an ability to be reasonable and to see a matter from a number of points of view. Third, *phronesis* requires a form of intelligence, or of the ability to gain a quick and overall grasp not only of the situation one finds oneself in, but also of what is to be done in that situation. According to Russell, while Aristotle describes this constituent part of *phronesis* as *nous*, and while *nous* is more often associated with scientific than with moral knowledge, as a form of intelligence *nous* is present in both good theoretical discovery and in good practical deliberation. Fourth, *phronesis* requires the cleverness (*deinotes*) needed to plan and execute an effective course of moral action.

Phronesis is not only being able to plan or to reason in a means/end fashion, but also it requires seeing situations in a morally intelligent and perceptive way.[33] The best way to explain what this "morally intelligent" seeing amounts to, is by asking what kind of activity the *phronimos* (the person with *phronesis*) engages: the activity of *phronesis par excellence* is practical ethical *deliberation*. While this form of deliberation is a deeply *intellectual* activity, it must not be confused with theoretical or scientific reasoning. A contemporary way of making clear the difference is to say that, while scientific reasoning is descriptive – in that it aims to describe how the world "is" – moral deliberation is normative in that it attempts to settle "how the world of human actions or affairs should be." We want children to develop the ability to engage in intelligent and critical moral deliberation with others.

III. Above, I held that, even if one is a dyed-in-the-wool Aristotelian, one has good grounds to see that the character education needed to form moral persons is an intellectual process, and that this should lead us to reconceive character as an intellectual rather than moral educational endeavour. One might anticipate an obvious counter to this argument: shouldn't the aim of school-based moral education be the inculcation of *both* moral *and* intellectual virtue? In response one might ask what contribution the school as an institution is in the best position to make.

First, we must observe that the way the school is organized as an institution in our society means that it already deals more with the shaping of children's intellect than it deals with the shaping of their morals. Advocates of moral education may disagree to the extent that it is at school that children do already learn many of the moral lessons that they will take with them on the course of their lives. The point, however, is not that school teaches moral lessons, but rather that, in the way the school organizes its explicit curriculum, it is more concerned with the transmission of theoretical knowledge and of thinking ability than with moral knowledge. The point is that in the "economy" of education, the school is better placed than parents to impart scientific rather than moral knowledge.

Consider that, for the most part, teachers are experts in their subjects to an extent that parents are not. It is rare that a parent is in general better informed, scientifically speaking, than *all* of their children's teachers together or is generally better equipped than their children's teachers to teach them everything they need to learn and know about those subjects. (Moreover, schools are equipped with libraries, resources, and equipment that the home environment generally cannot match.) There is an epistemic

division of labour in play between parents and schools that makes it easier for most parents to entrust most of the intellectual formation of their children to the school.

Because schools already concentrate on intellectual formation, it is not unreasonable to think that schools are better suited to inculcating the intellectual thinking abilities that I discussed above, rather than to training children in the moral virtues. As Graham Haydon puts it:

> There is a strong case … for concentrating on what schools do best, which is, I suspect, even given the important recognition of ethos and example, to teach things of a broadly cognitive nature. Schools may or may not lead to people being different kinds of people, but we should have some confidence at least that they *can* and sometimes do, lead people to a knowledge and understanding which, without formal schooling, they probably would not have developed.[34]

However, matters look different if one considers the influence that the family and other close societal institutions (such as clubs, churches, communities, etc.) can have on children's moral development. In comparison to both the *time* that children spend with their families and peers and the *impact* that families and communities have on children's morals, the impact of the school is – while important – secondary. As noted above, schools also face the more pressing task of shaping children's intellects. For this reason, Haydon holds that:

> the Aristotelian account of the development of virtues has it that initially the main consideration is that people are brought up in the right habits of action. Here again, the influence of a school is limited compared with all the rest of a child's familial and social environment.[35]

The suggestion is that the school is simply better placed to provide intellectual rather than practical moral input to children's character development. This seems to be not unlike Aristotle's own view that, while one can teach intellectual virtue, moral virtue must be practiced and leads naturally to the conclusion that character education in school should depart from an effort to shape intellectual rather than moral virtue.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that, if character education is an important part of education, the kind of character we should want to promote through school-based character education is not moral character, but intellectual character. I held that defending such a view faces the test of establishing that intellectual and moral character are distinct. I held that intellectual virtue passes the test of being sufficiently different from moral character to be a separate goal in education. I also demonstrated why education for intellectual character is a more sensible educational goal than the inculcation of moral character. I held that in order to (first) deal with unfamiliar moral situations and (second) to be able to justify moral actions, it is not enough that a person simply be moral – it requires moral reasoning ability. Lastly, I held that, practically speaking, the school is better placed to shape intellectual character. In the field of character education, we have occasion to believe, like Pliny, that the cobbler should stick to his last and do what he does best.

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8. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics,* 1103a 15.

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13. Ibid., 142-145.

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16. Ibid., 207-208.

17. Ibid., 210-214.

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19. Ibid.*,* 367-368.

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26. Jason Baehr, "Educating for Intellectual Character," *Voices in Education, the Blog of Harvard Education Publishing* (2013) http://hepg.org/blog/educating-for-intellectual-character. Retrieved 17 March 2016.

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28. Harvey Siegel, "Truth, Thinking, Testimony, and Trust: Alvin Goldman on Epistemology and Education," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 71 no. 2 (2005): 345-366.

29. See Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason*.

30. See Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*.

31. Kristjánsson, *Aristotelian Character Education*, 97.

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33. For discussion, see Russell, *op cit.,* 20-24.

34. Haydon, *Teaching about Values,* 131.

35. *Ibid.*, 125.