

Dwelling with Uncertainty in the Moral Life

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Daniel Vokey is taken with Alasdair MacIntyre's conception of Aristotelian moral education, and with good reason. Through an impressive, influential line of inquiry, MacIntyre has articulated an orientation that both honors the tradition of moral philosophy to which Aristotle gave a powerful form, and that addresses many contemporary concerns and questions about moral education.¹ A wide array of scholars in education, myself among them, have found MacIntyre's work (perhaps especially his book, *After Virtue*) fruitful in thinking about the moral dimensions of educational practice.

Vokey's study of MacIntyre's moral philosophy, however, has left him dissatisfied with respect to a question that no moral educator worth his or her salt can ignore: How do persons learn, in moral terms, from experience? Posed in Aristotle's familiar terms, how do persons learn to feel and to act "at the right times on the right grounds towards the right people for the right motive and in the right way" — a formidable list of "rights," as many commentators have observed. According to Vokey, MacIntyre does not adequately answer these questions. I think MacIntyre may have a bit more to say about them than Vokey allows, but I will suggest that only in passing because Vokey acknowledges that the lacunae in MacIntyre's framework can be found in moral philosophies everywhere. Nobody, or so it seems, has developed a conclusive, airtight, or final explanation of how human beings learn, in moral terms, from experience (which is not to say that all attempts are equally suggestive or equally fruitless).

Vokey believes that the explanation resides, in part, in the idea of intrinsic goodness, and he argues that MacIntyre's philosophy lacks an account of this idea. I take it that intrinsic goodness describes virtuous conduct that is not reducible to a means to something else. As Immanuel Kant might put it, such goodness has no price. There exists nothing higher or more valuable, nor anything equivalent, for which it could be exchanged.² Human beings can learn to recognize and respond to such goodness, or so the suggestion runs, and they can learn to build this recognition into the theory-practice dialectic MacIntyre advances. Vokey seems to find the dialectic true to life, at least as far as it goes.

In these brief remarks, I want to respond to the ways in which Vokey frames his questions about moral education and how he seeks to answer them. I will consider two aspects of his approach: (1) how he invites us to think about what he calls "the quality of human experience," and (2) how he urges us to conceive the place of moral theory in understanding and living a moral life.

I should say up front that I found the phrase "the quality of human experience" a bit awkward. At first glance, it made me think of evaluating low and high quality experience, with perhaps a middle range in between, an issue which gave rise, in turn, to questions about what is meant by "quality." But Vokey is not seeking to

emphasize a hierarchy of experience per se. In a large sense, he seems to be spotlighting *human responsiveness* to persons, events, situations, moods, feelings, thoughts, and more. Moreover, he is calling attention to the pre-theoretical or pre-reflective aspect of such responsiveness, to a quality of human being that illuminates a person's dispositions, sensibility, and moral perception. John Dewey sought to shed light on this responsiveness by describing what he called "the immediate quality of experience." Dewey writes of learning to discern or feel the quality of a situation, much as one learns to differentiate rocks by feeling their smoothness or roughness. In time, just as a person can learn to "feel" rocks just by looking at their surfaces, not by having to handle them, so a person can learn to "feel" the morally salient in a particular situation. Dewey characterizes this process as the development of habits of perception and response.³ However, Dewey offers no final answer to the question of how a person can actually develop such habits, just as, in broader terms, he offers no final, ultimate explanation of how a person can learn, in moral terms, from experience.

Nor has Iris Murdoch, another philosopher keenly interested in the concerns Vokey raises, offered a kind of final explanation. Murdoch asks how a moral philosophy can account for both Socrates and what she calls "the virtuous peasant."⁴ Murdoch finds both persons attractive from a moral point of view. Both do the right thing (at least more often than not). Socrates has well-developed theoretical knowledge and understanding of the moral — as well as deep practical knowledge — while the virtuous peasant has well-developed but untheorized practical knowledge. Murdoch seems to admire deeply human beings who go straight to the moral mark without undertaking the seemingly endless equivocating to which philosophers are notoriously prone.⁵ Murdoch's response to the question about moral learning features terms such as attending, perceiving, and obeying reality — in a sense she develops from Simone Weil, — especially the moral reality of other persons. Murdoch provides provocative, suggestive remarks about how persons can cultivate and deepen their immediate moral responsiveness to persons and situations. But she does not explain how a person actually learns, in moral terms, from doing all of this.

Dewey and Murdoch would share, I think, Vokey's reservations about MacIntyre's turn to an Augustinian-Thomistic framework for trying to resolve what Vokey calls the Catch-22 of moral learning. They would be troubled by the idea of putting moral learning in the service of some other end, including the end of coming closer to God. They would rather conceive moral learning, *pace* Aristotle, as the enactment of human being — here on earth, so to speak — at its fullest, widest, and deepest. Murdoch writes of the sovereignty of Good, not of God. Dewey writes of the sovereignty of Growth. Like Vokey, they mirror a fundamentally Kantian posture, believing it somehow important, even in the face of the alleged incarnation of the Creator, to turn to reason and experience rather than accept an a priori religious framework.⁶

Vokey takes seriously MacIntyre's turn to religious faith. He does not dismiss it, but seeks to engage it. He comes away with no answers, but in that engagement

resides a sign of respect for the many influential religion- or faith-based accounts (if not in so many words) of how persons learn, in moral terms, from experience. Just as many philosophers have sought insight into the moral source of our collective humanity, so many religious people have yearned for insight into why things are at all. Why *are* we capable in the first place of recognizably moral conduct? Ralph Waldo Emerson famously answered, “All our days are so unprofitable while they pass, that ‘tis wonderful where or when we ever got anything of this which we call wisdom, poetry, virtue. We never got it on any dated calendar day. Some heavenly days must have been intercalated somewhere.... ‘Tis the trick of nature thus to degrade today; a good deal of buzz, and somewhere a result slipped magically in.”⁷ Vokey would not, I think, be content with this way of thinking. It may seem to replace a heavenly heaven with some kind of gravity-bound heaven, but a heaven nonetheless, when the whole point is to understand this earthly and earthy moral life of ours. In any case, unlike MacIntyre but very much like Murdoch and Dewey (and a certain side of Emerson), Vokey concludes that we humans had best look for something human to account for how we learn, *as* humans, to take on the moral (or fail to, as the case may be).

Posed differently, Vokey suggests that it would be wise to question MacIntyre’s turn to moral theory, rather than to moral experience, to answer the question about moral learning. Like Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch, and other thinkers, I hear Vokey urging philosophers to learn to “wait,” to not rush into life with their arms packed with theories, but to wait, listen, look, ponder, so that their moral theories come into play as helpers. They help clarify the lineaments and predicaments of the moral life. They do not take their place in the existential queue of what persons confront as they enter and make their way through the world. I have in mind here a particularly suggestive example in Vokey’s essay — at least as I understand it, — namely, when he writes that learning to grasp the intrinsic goodness of virtuous conduct “is more like coming to appreciate why good health is desired for its own sake than like coming to understand the causes of remedies of disease.” I think this example helps us move beyond the means/ends dichotomy that Vokey discerns in MacIntyre’s work. It does so because it evokes a way of being, a way of conduct, not a discrete step toward a preordained end conceived apart from that step. Consider for a moment a familiar practice. There are basketball players who appreciate the beauty in fine passing skills — you can hear it in their court talk — and who also appreciate (if not in so many words) the goodness in those skills because they enact and honor the game, and because they point to the kind of player-person dedicated passers can become. In contrast, some participants regard passing skills as merely instrumental to their personal success, in which case they may become greedy millionaire franchises, rather than players (perhaps also well-paid) who automatically attract moral approbation by the sheer quality of their human-being-as-player. To those who discern this, the immediate moral quality of experience, as they take in the game, fuses with the moral quality on display.

In closing, I want to return to a statement I made in passing that MacIntyre has a bit more to say about moral learning than Vokey is able to address within the limits

set down by this conference. Let me suggest that MacIntyre's lengthier response could be distilled from his extensive remarks on community and on the nature of human practices, including in his book, *After Virtue*. In that book, MacIntyre shows that moral learning is a less isolated affair than it comes across as being in Vokey's interpretation. I do not mean that Vokey represents MacIntyre as harboring an individualist, much less atomist conception of personhood and moral learning. Far from it. But I am struck by the absence of community, of family, of practices, of persons in the plural, in the overall discussion. Vokey does mention teachers at one point, and captures there (as elsewhere in the essay) some of Aristotle's key claims about moral development. But I leave the essay wondering what a more sustained analysis of moral learning within a social nexus would disclose. Perhaps not a better answer to the question of how persons learn from experience, including the experience of engaging in MacIntyre's theory-practice dialectic. But perhaps a better sense of where persons are when they learn moral lessons, including about the Catch-22's of the moral life: in the home, the market, the street, the place of worship, and the school.

1. For a recent symposium on MacIntyre's work, see John Horton and Susan Mendus, eds., *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

2. Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1990), 51-52.

3. See especially John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1980).

4. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1985), 2.

5. Murdoch's impulse has been shared by any number of artists. Leo Tolstoy's Levin, a central character in his novel, *Anna Karenina*, yearns for moral simplicity and moral directness in his life. Moreover, Tolstoy's short story, "The Three Questions," seems like a direct response to Aristotle.

6. Kant, *Foundations*, 24. In this passage, Kant emphasizes turning to what he calls pure reason. Elsewhere, however, he underscores the necessity of taking experience seriously for both understanding and becoming moral beings. See, for example, his *Lectures on Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1979).

7. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York: The Library of America), 472-73.