

Moral Education and the Limits of Virtue

Kristen A. Grace and Craig Vivian
Cornell University

Jan Steutel and Ben Spiecker open and close their thought-provoking discussion of “the good, the bad, and the pedophile” with a concern for moral education. If we are to take “virtuousness” as a guiding principle for the practice of moral education, they contend, it behooves us to examine the nature of virtue. One area of controversy is the role of affect in the life of the virtuous person. Steutel and Spiecker use the conflicted affective life of the pedophile to examine two opposing views concerning responsibility for desires. These views are connected with Aristotelian and Kantian traditions of moral philosophy. If either view is sustained or undermined by the moral conflicts of the pedophile, that might move us further ahead in our understanding of what we are seeking to instill through virtue-focused moral education. Steutel and Spiecker also have a second agenda, to examine the role of identity — and sexual identity in particular — given the conflicts that occur when one’s central tendencies do not fit with one’s normative beliefs. We will try to address both projects and the problems of trying to focus on virtue through consideration of identity.

The case of the pedophile provides several important implications for moral education. Following Steutel and Spiecker’s argument, the pedophile can stand for any person whose unchosen and unchangeable desires do not conform with practical reason. The pedophile, then, forces us to examine the questions of the potential harms of moral education that adopts as an educational ideal the virtuous person whose inclinations are in perfect harmony with practical reason. The case of the pedophile also highlights the importance of moral education for those who would be tempted to judge others based on their immutable desires and not their actions.¹ While judging action to be moral or immoral is a necessary social function, judging people based on their unalterable desires or identities may not be. Steutel and Spiecker could push their argument further to suggest that moral education cultivates an attitude of humility, since no one is fully virtuous, but they stop short of this, allowing the non-pedophiles among us to feel lucky (and perhaps superior?) in that our desires may not be as far out of line with practical reason.

The weakness of choosing the case of the pedophile is that the pedophile has the misfortune of being unable to cultivate desires to be in line with practical reason. Thus, if we want to answer more general questions concerning the nature of virtue, and the appropriateness of Aristotelian and Kantian conceptions thereof, we must choose cases in which the immutability of desire does not predetermine the answers.

From the case of the pedophile we seem to learn that we ought to scale back Aristotelian expectations that our desires be in harmony with practical reason and drop the responsibility thesis in our moral education of individuals. Why have people beat themselves up for their desires? Why not instead focus on developing the cognitive skills and virtues of courage and self-control necessary to help any individual, pedophile or not, learn how to live a life that is not destructive of others

in the face of whatever desires she may have? Yet these lessons cannot be generalized for moral education more broadly since the particular example of the pedophile leaves us unable to answer whether our understanding of virtue should always find people virtuous in their attempt (if not the achievement) of harmony while at the same time discounting any responsibility they may have for harmonizing their desires.

Indeed the very insight that the pedophile is simply unlucky in being inherently unable to be fully virtuous keeps this case from being an interesting test case for the harmony and responsibility theses in moral education. If the evidence is correct that the pedophile did not choose and cannot change his orientation, then he is not morally distinguishable from a person with a form of mental illness that generates a desire to harm others. We do not consider the mentally ill person to be responsible for her desires, and in many instances, not even for her actions. Indeed, we consider it immoral to hold her responsible for those desires that she did not choose and cannot change. As Steutel and Spiecker indicate at the end of their paper, those of us who are tempted to hold her responsible for her illness might ourselves be “bad.”

Yet, not all desires are analogous to “hard-wired” sexual preferences or to such forms of mental illness. Are we to draw the implication that because we cannot be held responsible for desires that are beyond our control, moral education should only be concerned with actions and not also with desires? Similarly should we conclude that we would also be immoral if we make judgments concerning the desires of others when those desires are socially and personally cultivated and changeable? Should people feel as though they ought to bring their emotions in line with practical judgment? The example of the pedophile leaves us unable to answer these questions, or the question of when, if ever, we are responsible for striving for Aristotelian harmony.

Steutel and Spiecker’s argument illustrates a weakness in the Aristotelian view that appears to allow for assignment of responsibility in cases where individuals are not morally responsible. They also suggest that a strong reading of the “harmony” thesis discounts the virtue of people whose inclinations may not be praiseworthy, but whose self-control is. A partial reading of the harmony thesis, however, allows us to recognize the ideal — and responsibility — of trying to align the desires we can cultivate with practical reason. With this understanding of virtue, it is appropriate to judge the sane person with a desire to do something harmful even if the person who has the desire has never acted upon it. A person who has the desire to hurt another person is less virtuous than the person who has no such desire even if the actions of the two are the same.

If a desirable virtue is cultivatable, this suggests that a person may become progressively more virtuous when successfully undertaking such cultivation, despite having a simultaneously persisting desire that does not accord with practical reason. Like the pedophile, I remain always less than fully virtuous, but unlike the pedophile I am responsible for cultivating an affective life that enables me to be virtuous. I have this responsibility precisely because my desires in this realm can be cultivated.

This line of argument for desires over which we have control suggests an interesting argument for cases of lust which may fall under the unchangeable aspects of arousal-response patterns Steutel and Spiecker outlined. Perhaps, instead of the choice between unresisted adultery and the imposition of one's iron will, it may be possible to cultivate a desire to be faithful in the face of lust. The virtue of sexual fidelity is meaningless in the absence of desire to have sex with others. So, although it would be true in some sense to say that I am imperfectly virtuous because I am a person who lusts, it would also be true to say that it is only because I lust that the virtue of self-control is a virtue that I can also claim.

It might be one role of moral education to cultivate in each of us the ability to construct our moral selves rather than acquiesce to our bad (or good) luck. If Steutel and Spiecker are correct, then moral education cannot address the aspects of central identity. Most aspects of central identity are not moral issues. How and whether we regulate our desires, or cultivate additional desires can fall into the moral domain. It would then seem incumbent upon moral educators to focus on the development of a self conception (or interpretive identity) that is in line with the normative self. This may involve recognizing that we each have a complex, intertwined set of desires, some more mutable than others. If all of these desires are in some sense "mine" that I am responsible for, not all of them need to be defining of "me" or how I see myself as a moral person in the world. For example, someone who struggles with the desire to take things from stores without paying may recognize that "kleptomania is unfortunately mine, but it is not me." I acknowledge my uncontrollable desire to steal, but I take on the moral project of subordinating that desire to my desire to live as an honest person.

One role of moral education may be to enable us to separate what is "me" from what is "mine" or to recognize that some of my desires get in the way of my larger vision of the good life. I may not be able to eliminate malicious desires, but I may try to live in such a way that I am not dominated by those desires over which I have some control. In this sense, striving for harmony in the face of imperfection can be a moral project. Practically speaking, moral educators are unlikely to address the difficult and exotic moral issues that arise with immutable desires. They are much more likely to succeed in instilling an Aristotelian understanding that a good and virtuous life is achieved through the reconciliation of affect and reason.

Along with Steutel and Spiecker, this understanding of virtue calls for enlarging the harmony thesis. What is important, these examples hint, is that virtue does not stem from complete harmony with practical reason, but from the unending and always imperfectly conducted cultivation of desires that allow a person to act in line with practical reason. This answer to the question of who is virtuous does not ignore the affective component but recognizes the struggle of competing emotions, desires, and the role of the will.

We are optimistic that the teaching of virtue can be accommodated in moral education. But it must be an education that focuses on teaching each of us how to separate what is "mine" from what is "me" when that is necessary, as well as instructing us how to recognize and claim the virtues which can help us harmonize

our interpretive with our normative selves. It is not enough to exhort us to “hate the sin, but not the sinner”; we should also learn to love the virtuous regardless of the virtue.

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