

BACK TO THE FUTURE: COMING TO TERMS WITH THE CLAIMS OF HISTORY AND EXPEDIENCY IN RECENT CHARACTER EDUCATION INITIATIVES

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Introduction

In a passage that nicely summarizes the prevailing outlook of character education in the United States today, a noted figure in this movement writes:

Given the enormous moral problems facing [our] country, their deep social roots, and the ever-increasing responsibilities that schools already shoulder, the prospect of taking on moral education can seem overwhelming. The good news...is that values education can be done within the school day, is happening now in school systems all across the country, and is making a positive difference in the moral attitudes and behavior of students, with the result that it's easier for teachers to teach and students to learn.

The author then goes on to affirm that

Two universal moral values form the core of a public, teachable morality: respect and responsibility.¹

How could anyone who hears repeatedly in the media of ghastly episodes of school violence, a lack of student respect and discipline in the classroom, drug and alcohol abuse amongst teenagers, and the general nihilism and excesses of the ominously-labeled "Generation X" responsibly dispute the basic claims being articulated here? He or she would have to be somewhat morally depraved or care little about the behavioral prerequisites for effective student learning. At least that is what a number of my graduate students were encouraged to think as they conducted their researches on character education this

past fall.

In the course of this brief paper, I will eventually suggest that one might indeed dispute the preceding claims. And I would like to think that this does not signify a lack of morally integrity on my part. It is not my express purpose, however, to try to augment or magnify the various criticisms that have previously been laid at the door of character education (a pedagogy whose current revival, you will recall, originated in the early 1990s²). These well-rehearsed criticisms can stand or fall of their own merit. My immediate aim here, as I see it, is actually a somewhat more mundane one, though I would like to think that it is no less important in the long run. I want to explore a little why it is that recent character education initiatives have proven so compelling to teachers and the general public alike (conservative as well as liberal), and why the assorted criticisms so often fall on deaf ears, or even incur confusion, frustration, and anger.

My paper begins with a brief account of the beginnings of character education, one that marks, in particular, the continuity between its past and present forms, and then enumerates the kinds of character traits being advocated in the current literature. This is followed by an overview of the commonly identified strengths and weaknesses of character education as we discussed them in my graduate course on the philosophical and psychological foundations of education. Next, I look at the basic nature and tenor of the responses to character education offered in several students' term papers. Finally, I attempt to make sense of and, along the way, problematize the attractions of character education in a manner that acknowledges its enticing claims to history and expediency, but also suggests a way to help students see beyond them.

Character Education Past and Present

It is well known that Aristotle is usually considered the central figure in the early development of character education.³ And he remains its most frequently invoked authority even today. Aristotle recognized, more than many of his time, that human beings can never

achieve complete infallibility in matters of morality. The forces of circumstance, he argued, can be powerful enough to snap (or at least severely fray) even our strongest moral fibers. Consequently, in his writings on ethics Aristotle appealed not to the realm of the ideal as a basis for his model of human virtue, but rather to empirical reality — to the people and behaviors that seemed most consistently to characterize Athenian society at its best. His criteria for making this determination were founded largely upon the authority of tradition; which meant, in effect, upon the interests, values, and beliefs of those in whose interest it was to maintain the general status quo of that rigidly classed society. Thus in a distinctly circular fashion, virtue was essentially defined by the people and behaviors that were said on the authority of these same people to display virtue.

In accordance with this emphasis on authority and tradition, Aristotle likewise held to what Plato termed the well-ordered society. And he maintained that in such a society an overall consensus must exist as to what activities and functions different individuals need to perform to maintain this vital order. Regardless of one's destined station in life (politician, artisan, slave, wife, etc.), human virtue or moral character, following Aristotle, consisted in performing one's activities and functions with excellence and for the good of the whole, through which alone individual happiness was possible. He did strongly suggest, though, that these virtues tend to differ from station to station. (Magnificence, for instance, is certainly only available to the very wealthy.) As detailed in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, the principal moral virtues included courage, temperance, liberality, magnificence, magnanimity, proper ambition, patience, truthfulness, wittiness, friendliness, modesty, and righteous indignation. The principal intellectual virtues, on the other hand, were practical and theoretical wisdom.⁴

Aristotle claimed that the intellectual virtues were for the most part beyond the capacities of the young; they necessitated an ability to reason that could only come with maturity and considerable life experience. He did, however, believe that the moral virtues both could

and should be habituated early on in life. To become a person of virtue, Aristotle famously said, one must develop the habit of acting virtuously and be encouraged to do so, often through imitating adults. This was to be the job of the first stage of one's education, and it was to take place in the home and (as we moderns put it) the local community. After these virtuous habits had been firmly established, and only then, young adults could safely reason about and analyze various moral issues - they could engage in the discourse of philosophy. At the most fundamental level, though, a person of good moral character was someone who regularly displayed courage, temperance, patience, modesty, and so forth in his or her workaday life.

I would argue that many significant aspects of this Aristotelian line of thinking can be found in character education today. Consider, if you will, the following.⁵

Contemporary proponents of character education often train their moral compasses on the good of the community as a whole - initially, on the classroom and school communities - and they maintain that this good must occasionally supersede individual freedoms. (Freedom of expression comes most immediately to mind.) Civic responsibility or virtue thus tends to be a prominent theme in their thinking. Contemporary forms of character education also stress the interweaving of intellectual and moral excellence through strenuous, disciplined activity and as indispensable to genuine human happiness. Though the irrational element of our nature must be attended to first, as a precondition for more cognitive pursuits, both our rational and irrational sides, it is said, must eventually be made to work in harmony with one another. It is not enough simply to know what virtue consists in; it must also be practiced so as to become habitual and tinged with the appropriate emotions. Along this same line, like Aristotle, modern character education is frequently grounded in some conception of essential human nature, be it either secular or sacred in orientation. And it is claimed that this essential nature takes readily observable forms in everyday life, regardless of the contingencies of time and place. Additionally, appeals to the authority of history or tradition occur with great regularity. For instance, and again reminiscent of

Aristotle, it is inferred that we already know from past history what virtue or good character consists in, and that it must be fostered in some sort of explicit fashion or one is not really conducting moral education. This frequently means identifying a number of virtuous role models — people, such as teachers, who have shown that they can function successfully and responsibly in a well-ordered society. More recently, literature and biography have been used in this same capacity.⁶ And lastly, the different virtues are typically promoted as timeless universals. They are thought to apply for all people and in all possible situations, while several have been dubbed foundational in nature. As they appear on various published lists, these virtues, taken together, total well over one hundred. Here are some of the more popular entries: respect, responsibility, civility, patriotism, self-control or discipline, diligence, generosity, fairness, courage, and integrity.

Commonly Identified Strengths and Weaknesses of Character Education

As an introduction to the theory behind character education, and as one of our main course texts for the semester, my graduate foundations students and I read and discussed Nel Noddings' book *Philosophy of Education*. In her concise overview of the past and present forms of character education, Noddings recounts several commonly identified strengths and weaknesses of this approach to moral education.⁷ I will first speak of the strengths.

According to Noddings, one of the most positively received aspects of character education is its insistence that the moral life must grow out of our everyday interactions with others. That is to say, it maintains that virtue is essentially empty if it does not involve a horizon of significance, an abiding sense of the good, that reaches beyond the individual self. A meaningful individuality implies sociality, as John Dewey liked to put it. Similarly, character educators recognize that the consistency and integrity of virtue necessarily depends upon the conditioning that the demands of the natural and so-

cial environment make on the self. Hence character education typically avoids the pitfalls of hyper-cerebral, ivory tower moralities, the kind too often proposed by modern academic philosophers.

Second, character education seems to be on firm ground in emphasizing the priority of practice. Virtue is as virtue does, runs the popular expression. It is one thing simply to memorize a series of moral rules or possess the ability to solve artificial moral dilemmas, to know what virtue consists in in some abstracted sense. But history reveals that actually living and applying this knowledge or skill effectually in the everyday, and with a sensitivity to concrete particulars, is altogether another matter. With character education, though, learning to be moral entails developing an active disposition to certain types of behaviors through firsthand experience. Virtue becomes an integral part of the self.

Lastly, Noddings mentions the great practical appeal of character education. She notes that it directs its energies at the possibilities and empirical reality of whatever the society has at hand, and not one that requires super-human abilities, thus also acknowledging the limits and liabilities of the human condition. This commonsensical quality of character education extends to its general developmental sensitivity as well. For it seeks the inculcation of basic virtues, the attainment of certain social norms, as a prerequisite to more complex moral reasoning, questioning, and critical analyses.

Likewise, there are three commonly identified weaknesses of character education worth mentioning. First, the concern has often been raised that the virtues identified within a given society, particularly in relation to its presumptions concerning the good life, might be inculcated in the young without sufficient critical examination by educators and the adult public. Moreover, we all know how difficult it can be to alter our habits of thought and behavior after they have been deeply ingrained and regularly reinforced. Noddings suggests, for example, that a seemingly exemplary figure like Thomas Jefferson felt constrained in denouncing slavery because it appeared to him so

indispensable to the well-ordered society of his day. Similarly, some have argued that virtues such as generosity easily assume self-righteous, paternalistic forms that can act to suppress or blunt more substantive efforts to bring about social and economic equality.

Second, Noddings points out that the empirical evidence regarding the ability of character education to satisfy its strong claims is not as compelling as one might like. For instance, several studies have shown that children may be likely to exercise the prescribed virtues when authority figures are present, but are not so well behaved when these authorities are elsewhere. We are told that character education can “conquer materialism, demonstrate respect for life and property, and stem the tide of violence in our land,” but deep-seated transformations of character as a result of formal education seem rare to nonexistent.⁸ Some people (Dewey among them), have thus questioned the merits of singling out certain activities as the special province of moral education. Overall, then, it is not clear that character education can effectively address the influences on student behavior that exist beyond the school walls or whether schools, as the designated guardians of virtue, can substantively modify the moral character of society.

Finally, character education has been criticized for its persistent appeals to tradition and authority. For these would seem to presume the existence of a just, well-ordered society, one in which there is widespread agreement on the roles and functions of each of its members. Yet is this really the case in the United States today? Moreover, is there consensus or near consensus on the virtues to be transmitted to the young? If not, what happens to the treasured virtues of subcultures when these virtues differ from those of the dominant group in society? Several commentators have argued that character education has so far been unable to provide satisfactory answers to these questions.

Students' Responses to Character Education

Shortly after we concluded our lively and, I would like to think, evenhanded discussion of character education, almost half of my eigh-

teen students (all of them with children of their own) informed me that they had decided to write their term papers on this subject. Furthermore, they chose to do so because, at least at the time, either they or people that they knew had character education programs underway in their own schools. This being the case, I gave them minimal guidance in their research and anticipated receiving some probing and provocative papers. Our exchanges in class plainly indicated that the students were now prepared to assess the strengths and weaknesses of character education with a fair but critical eye.

As I began reading through the papers several weeks later, it soon became clear that the students had had a difficult time exercising this fair but critical eye in their researches. In fact, it was all but nonexistent. The papers were, from a scholarly perspective, disconcertingly unbalanced. Though the opportunities to do so were plentiful, the students failed to raise any theoretical questions or concerns about character education generally or about the specific programs that they had investigated. And only one practice-oriented question was ever broached. Instead, the claims of history and expediency, so prevalent in character education literature, now governed their thinking.

What I mean here is that the students referred repeatedly, and with a sense of nostalgia, to the days before our (supposed) recent and steep moral and cultural decline, the days when everyone agreed upon and lived by the same basic values. All but one of the papers began with a recitation of recent statistics on the frequency of lying, stealing, cheating, and violence among young people. Much of this was blamed either on the demise of the traditional two-parent “American family” or the low moral standards in our schools. Surprisingly, the popular media was imputed somewhat less frequently. On the other hand, the students openly praised the universal nature and practicality of virtues such as punctuality, loyalty, self-reliance, and the dignity and necessity of honest labor - what might be termed an “industrial morality” for the 21st century. It did not bother them that references to critical thinking were relatively few and far between.

And they accepted without question the standard notion that charity is the best way to advance the welfare of the less fortunate.

The students were also powerfully attracted to the claim that, as quoted earlier, “values education can be done within the school day...[and] with the result that it’s easier for teachers to teach and students to learn.” Wherever possible, most of them strove to find in their research that this was indeed the case, even if the evidence they finally offered was rather scant. However, the students did question the effectiveness of “virtue of the week” and worksheet-driven approaches to character education. These were thought to be too artificial. Yet this minor practical concern was effectively eclipsed by their stories of frustration with undisciplined students and the irksome fact that “you can’t lay a hand on them anymore.” As adults and classroom teachers, then, character education appeared after their research a moral and pedagogical imperative. Hence it just seemed wrong to suggest that it could be in any critical way misguided.⁹

Problematising the Attractions of Character Education

It is quite obvious, I think, that my students are not alone in being attracted to the notion that a return to “traditional” values will bring with it a safer and more cohesive society. On the surface at least, and couched in these terms, who would not be? The fashionable discourse of moral and cultural decline suggests that the very foundations of American life and schooling are eroding, and it urges that a recovery of the past is both possible and necessary. It calls us back to the future. We seem certain that we were more moral as youths than are young people today. If we can go back to basics with reading, writing, and arithmetic, why can’t our future be more like our past where morality is concerned?

I would also maintain that the idea of making one’s life and work easier is not attractive to classroom teachers alone. The “cult of efficiency” now reaches into all aspects of our lives and has doubtless received a powerful shot in the arm from the many new information technologies. With the level of productivity expected from each

of us today, and especially in light of the demands for accountability facing teachers, why not take the path of least resistance? What teacher working in such conditions would turn down a chance to make teaching and learning “easier”? Besides, how could making things easier in itself be a bad thing?

I do not pretend to have answers to all of these questions. Ultimately, they touch upon very complex issues concerning the parameters of possibility set by the socio-cultural milieu in which we live. But I will say that my experience this past fall has enhanced my awareness of the need to problematize some of the claims of these questions, to help my students get a glimpse beyond them. This might go something like the following.

In a country that purportedly aspires to a genuine, democratic pluralism, the more difficult path to (moral) education could well be the more virtuous one in the long run. A pluralistic approach to virtue would seem to necessitate a sustained conversation (involving individuals as well as groups) on the most appropriate means and ends for living well in a democratically sovereign society. This will no doubt leave us feeling a bit disoriented now and again, yet without being completely helpless. It is not easy to accept the “other” as an “other” while at the same time recognizing our common humanity. Nor is it easy to keep the question as to what constitutes virtue or the good an open one, developing and maintaining a sustained dialogue on the subject that is sensitive to things like incommensurability and indeterminacy. But as philosopher Robert Nash writes, such a democratic disposition entails that we continually find new ways to negotiate our way through and learn from “the inevitable clash of values that is the heart and soul of democratic living.” And this requires from all of us a degree of “caution and humility” that sits poorly with the claims of expediency advanced by character education.¹⁰

People generally had stronger moral sensibilities in the past. Perhaps. But at what cost? How many perspectives on the good and the just were effectively marginalized in the past? What, for example,

was it like to be a Native American student in the days when the Lord's Prayer was recited at the start of every school day? Moreover, how many important social movements have depended upon certain people or groups not being responsible to the authority of conventional norms and their keepers? And what of the World Trade Organization protests of today? In claiming the authority of tradition and moral sensibilities of the past, one could argue, we implicitly promote a morality of compliance to the status quo. We say, in effect, "we have no doubt made some errors in the past. However we have learned from them, finally achieved true enlightenment, substantive equity and justice, and are now ready to secure our gains and begin reasserting timeless virtues." Can this really be the case, though, in a country that leads the industrialized world in the percentage of children and elderly living in poverty, percentage of the population without health insurance, homelessness, unequal distribution of wealth, defense spending, foreign debt, deaths by execution, and so on?¹¹ Are recent character education initiatives really receptive and responsive enough to these problems? And are they best interpreted as simple failures of character? I will leave it to you to decide.

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NOTES

1. Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), pp.22 and 67.
2. See, for example, William J. Bennett's *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), *Marva Collins' Marva Collins' Way*, (New York: Putnam, 1990), William Kilpatrick's *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right From Wrong: Moral Illiteracy and the Case for Character Education*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), Edward Wynne and Kevin Ryan's *Reclaiming Our Schools: A Handbook on Teaching Character, Academics, and Discipline*, and the previously cited volume by Thomas Lickona.
3. Elements of this synopsis of Aristotle's ethics were drawn from Nel Noddings' *Philosophy of Education*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).

4. Aristotle, *Ethics*, trans. J.A.K. Thomson, (London: Penguin Books, 1955).
5. See Note 2 for the popular literature on character education from which this general profile was drawn. I must also confess that the risk of over-generalizing or creating a one-sided profile always attends this sort of activity. While allowing for the necessary brevity of this paper, I have tried to avoid doing either.
6. Wayne C. Booth's *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) is frequently referenced in this regard.
7. See Noddings, *Philosophy of Education*, pp.12-14 and 149-151.
8. See J.S. Leming's "In Search of Effective Character Education," *Educational Leadership* 51 (1993): 63-71. The preceding quotation is from the SUNY Cortland Center for the Fourth and Fifth Rs website, which is located at <http://www.cortland.edu/www/c4n5rs/>.
9. Robert J. Nash recently spoke of seeing this same phenomenon with his students in his book *Answering the Virtuecrats: A Moral Conversation on Character Education*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).
10. See Nash, *Answering the Virtuecrats*, p.11 and p.51.
11. See Andrew L. Shapiro, *We're Number One*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).