

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Aristotle's *Logos* and Determinate Potentialities: A Response to Daniel Patrone

David A. Granger

The spring 2003-2004 issue of *Educational Change* included an intriguing article by Daniel Patrone entitled "Contingency, Phronesis, and Character Education: A Restatement of the Value of a Traditional Liberal Arts Education." In this piece, Patrone thoughtfully critiques the portrayals of Aristotle and Aristotelian-based character education prefacing my article "Back to the Future: Coming to Terms with the Claims of History and Expediency in Recent Character Educative Initiatives" (see Granger, 2001-2002, pp.40-51). While I found much of what Patrone has to say a compelling amendment to my more circumscribed discussion, I wish to make a few brief comments concerning Aristotle's ontology which, I believe, point up issues that remain likely to constrain popular Aristotelian variants character education. I would also like to thank Anthony Roda for actively soliciting my response to Patrone's article and thereby encouraging continued conversation.

As a preliminary matter, I should say that it was never my intention to dismiss Aristotle's ethics outright or to discredit all forms of character education. That is why I openly acknowledged the potential attributes of character education and carefully qualified my remarks as aimed principally at "recent character education initiatives"; in particular, at why such initiatives "have proven so compelling to teachers [including my graduate students] and the general public alike (conservative as well as liberal)," and why various criticisms of the initiatives "so often fall on deaf ears, or even incur confusion, frustration, and anger" (Granger, p.41). I noted as well that my synoptic overview of Aristotle's ethics was drawn largely from Nel Noddings' *Philosophy of Education*, since this text provided much of the interpretive context for my students' reading of Aristotle (Granger, p.50). Nonetheless, given Patrone's concerns it is fair to say that I could have been a little more guarded in my use of Noddings' rather distilled, text-bookish commentary.

Patrone's basic criticism is that my article is preemptively dismissive of "traditionalism" as inherently retrograde and incompatible with enlightened thinking about morality and the good society. Patrone worries too that I consider "traditional" to be necessarily

“monistic, absolutistic and universalistic,” and as such antipathetic to democratic pluralism in its commitment to a “fixed constellation of beliefs, principles, values or virtues” (Patrone, pp.58-59). In seeking to displace what he sees as a critically truncated perspective, Patrone goes on to argue for the existence of different kinds of traditional morality, in part by showing—correctly, I think—that Aristotle’s ethics is oriented not primarily around fixed beliefs and principles (or other formalistic abstractions), but rather a kind of *phronesis* or practical wisdom that accepts and acknowledges the existence of contingency and particularity. This more scrupulous, pluralistic interpretation, Patrone claims, makes possible an Aristotelian conception of character education—as part of a traditional liberal arts education—that, in its basic formulation, avoids the pitfalls of current absolutistic, and insofar pseudo-Aristotelian, character education programs.

Patrone is doubtless right to claim that traditions are not inherently “wrong” simply by being traditional or “of the past.” Nor is there one single perspective that can be called traditional. Similarly, present opinion includes competing perspectives and is not “right” simply by being up-to-date or representing “the latest thinking.” As Dewey would argue, intellectual tools of the past as well as the present need to be tested, and recurrently retested, in the laboratory of lived experience to affirm their (continued) worth. But even accepting this, there remains cause for concern with the prescriptive “back to the future” mindset of much character education today, which may, in the end, be more Aristotelian than Patrone’s reading of Aristotle, compelling as it might otherwise be, suggests. This is because there are limitations to Aristotle’s understanding of contingency and particularity that significantly constrain the kind of pluralism his thinking can accommodate. I will explain what I mean below.

Like many of his Greek cohorts, Aristotle believed in an ordered cosmos and that this cosmos manifests a prior purpose and design. Moreover, understanding of this prior purpose and design through the application of reason is said to be deeply liberating both intellectually and spiritually. Thus for Aristotle, as educator Robert Nash explains,

we are required to live a harmonious, moral life, and in order to move toward a specific *telos* (our ultimate purpose), we need to live a virtuous life. And the virtues enable us to achieve our unique *telos*. We can only discover our *telos* as part of an ordered community. (Nash, 1997, p.38)

As Patrone points out, there is clearly room for individual variation in this virtuous life, both owing to differences in people's particular natures and the specific situations of their lives. (Aristotle was also willing to accept human fallibility and tragedy as inevitabilities.) However, this variation is circumscribed by a universe of a certain prior purpose and design, and a fixed rational principle, or *logos*, that exists in harmony with this universe. In addition, *contra* Patrone, the virtuous life for Aristotle reflects a specific, agreed-upon view of human nature and human flourishing (*eudaemonia*) as part of this orderly universe. (Following his conception of human nature, this *eudaemonia*, for Aristotle, turns out ideally to be a form of contemplation. This is arguably a very limited, even elitist view of human flourishing (see Aristotle, 1976, pp.333-334).) Such agreement, again, requires a socio-cultural nexus that expresses a more or less common *logos* and cognate *telos*, or in Patrone's more empirical terms, a shared moral sensitivity or perceptiveness and the practical wisdom (*phronesis*) to obtain it. (Thus Patrone speaks of the "appropriate traditions" and "suitable models for virtuous activity" (see Patrone, 2003-2004, p.67).) This commonality and shared sensitivity, while not inconceivable, is, I would argue, often lacking in our secular, increasingly pluralist society. Regardless, it most surely cannot take one particular set of traditions for granted as reflecting genuine human nature and ideal human flourishing.

One can also look at these issues from the standpoint of Aristotle's views on actuality and potentiality. For while Aristotle, unlike Plato, readily admits a degree of pluralism in acknowledging the existence and interrelation of chance and contingency, the precarious and the stable, the actual and the potential in nature, he also confines this pluralism within fixed categories of being and conceives the potentialities of nature to be predetermined and unchangeable. What is more, his ontology ultimately elevates the actual over the potential, the static over the dynamic as superior kinds of existences. This can be seen, to cite just a few examples, in the way Aristotle recognizes different virtues (or expressions of virtue) for the ruler and the slave, the husband and the wife, and so on, and ascribes different excellences to each in accordance with certain set natures and set functions. (Hence people born with slavish natures—and it is noteworthy that Aristotle sought to defend the practice of slavery philosophically—are fulfilled primarily through subservience.¹) As Noddings explains,

Virtues and excellences arise in the diligent pursuit of certain practices. These

practices or complex tasks are instituted and recognized by society, and they require a continuity of thought and action through planning, executing, monitoring, and evaluating. Different practices demand different excellences and even different virtues. Some people, because of the positions they hold, have opportunities to develop virtues and excellences that are highly prized; others do not. A hierarchy of virtues tends to induce and maintain a hierarchy of status and privilege. (Noddings, 1995, pp.139-140)

In such an orderly, highly-structured state, constructed in accordance with the *logos* and emphasizing consensus, the needs and welfare of the community are ultimately valued above all else, even, at times, at the expense of individual freedom. Patrone's account of the place of contingency, particularity, and pluralism in Aristotle does not explicitly recognize this significant limiting context in his ontology (see Patrone, 2003-2004, pp.66-69).

As suggested earlier, one of the great strengths of Aristotle's ethics over more abstract, idealist varieties is its rootedness in the full lived situation (*ousia*) of Greek life and the cultural institutions that give meaning and coherence to this life (see Granger, 2006, pp.66-67). This obviously has deep implications for appropriations of Aristotle in contemporary ethics, as one can see in the provocative work of someone like Martha Nussbaum, who believes meaningful social transformation is possible within an Aristotelian framework (see Nussbaum, 1986 and 1990). On the other hand, Noddings seems to me justified in worrying about Aristotle's heavy reliance on the ethical standards within a highly-structured, hierarchical society for exemplars of virtue, even if these exemplars ultimately seek "fuller, richer descriptions of the good" (Noddings, 1995, p.137). As she puts it,

One might acknowledge [the universality of courage] and still express concern about particular expressions of courage. If the courage of the warrior becomes the ideal, as it did in Homeric times, might not this virtue drown other virtues in its wake? Clearly, some forms of courage are compatible with compassion, humility, and gentleness, and others are not.

Accordingly, she argues,

When virtues are identified with a particular society, they may escape critical examination. The courage of the warrior may, for example, be so admired that

members of the society do not think (or dare) to criticize war itself. Honesty may be taken to a self-righteous extreme that ignores hurts inflicted on those who could do with a bit of prevarication. Aristotle himself felt constrained to defend slavery because it seemed necessary in a well-run society; he engaged in this defense even though some of his contemporaries saw the evils of slavery and faced up to its mere expediency. (Noddings, 1995, p.138 and pp.150-151)

Simply put, like many current practitioners of character education, Aristotle does not help us to see and/or move effectively beyond the limits and liabilities of our own socio-cultural context. While we are given the resources to develop virtuous habits and practical wisdom, we are not given the means to radically shift or expand our ethical horizons beyond certain largely determined parameters and possibilities. *Contra* Patrone, then, Aristotelian practical wisdom (*phronesis*) does not, in its conventional form, incorporate “a plurality of traditions and perspectives” (Patrone, 2003-2004, p.69).

In light of the above, I submit that Patrone is actually offering a significantly amended Aristotelian model of character education. For he expressly recognizes the need for students to develop *phronesis* through a more robust, deeper sort of pluralism, one that “requires us to gain an understanding of the traditions of others and how they interpret the significant facts of the world.”ⁱⁱ Such pluralism, Patrone claims, must involve “a situated understanding of exemplary cases from as many and as diverse traditions as possible” (Patrone, 2003-2004, p.69). I assume as well that this would entail multiple possible views of human nature and human flourishing (*eudaemonia*). To assist in this process, Patrone then critically augments the more traditional Aristotelian outlook with an emphasis on ongoing conversation within and across diverse individual and cultural contexts. As he explains, drawing on the work of Michael Oakshott, “schools can begin to initiate students into the conversation that makes up the total collective experience of human beings, and by initiating them into this conversation, provide them with the character necessary for successful participation in it” (Patrone, 2003-2004, p.72). While many people might wish to question the possibility and practicality of such inclusive conversation, it seems clear that Patrone is seeking an approach to character education that moves significantly beyond the limited purview of Aristotle as well as the “back to the future” mentality of much thinking today.

ENDNOTES

- i As philosopher and ethicist Steven Fesmire writes, “A push to abolish the institution of slavery would have been disdained by Aristotle as a utopian affront to human nature.” Aristotle’s skepticism regarding democracy is perhaps best seen in this light. See John Dewey & *Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), 26.
- ii Thus Patrone later refers to his project as offering “a broadly Aristotelian initiative in character education” (Patrone, 2003-2004, p.71, my emphasis). Following Dewey, I would also argue that facts and values are inseparable, such that all facts involve a degree of interpretation at some level.

REFERENCES

- Aristotle (1976). *Ethics*. Translated by J.A.K. Thomson. New York: Penguin Books.
- Fesmire, S. (2003). *John Dewey & Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Granger, D. (2006). *John Dewey, Robert Pirsig, and the Art of Living: Revisioning Aesthetic Education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Granger, D. (2001-2002). Back to the Future: Coming to Terms with the Claims of History and Expediency in Recent Character Education Initiatives. *Educational Change: A Journal of Role Analysis and Institutional Change*, Spring.
- Noddings, N. (1995). *Philosophy of Education*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.
- Nash, R.J. (1997). *Answering the Virtuecrats: A Moral Conversation on Character Education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Patrone, D. (2003-2004). Contingency, Phronesis, and Character Education: A Restatement of the Value of a Traditional Liberal Arts Education. *Educational Change: A Journal of Role Analysis and Institutional Change*, Spring.