

Should Blame Be Part of the Education of Character?

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Should blame be part of the education of character? In what follows, an answer is posited with reference to the contemporary character education movement in the United States. Or rather, in a philosophical methodology inspired by the late French philosopher-historian Michel Foucault, a different question-set is posed: How has the character education movement come to be constituted? What is its dominant rationality? Is blame a part of it? As revealed subsequently, a striking observation is that “blame” is largely missing in the literature of the movement. And yet it is powerfully but implicitly present in the discussions of movement adherents. Other questions arise: What does this absent/presence mean? Within what societal problematic has this occurred?

PHILOSOPHY

In the essay, philosophical-conceptual elements from Foucault’s work are utilized and described in a particularity, a kind of analysis of a set of texts. Their description comprises a comprehensive process named by him as “problematization.” As Foucault puts it, problematizations are collective social experiences “where experience is understood as a correlation between fields of knowledge, types of normativity, and forms of subjectivity in a particular culture.”¹ In other words, they each form a “domain of actuality,” of action, of thought to which the philosopher attends. He continues,

For a domain of action, a behavior, to enter the field of thought, it is necessary for a certain number of factors to have made it uncertain, to have made it lose its familiarity, or to have provoked a certain number of difficulties around it. These elements result from social, economic, or political processes. But here their role is only that of instigation.²

Significantly, problematizations are comprised of “conditions.” Conditions are specific rationalities or systems of thought that “work through” the fields named above — knowledge, normativity, and subjectivity. More precisely, complex relations are identified in the now well-recognized Foucauldian idiom of power/knowledge/ethics, in combinations of discursive and nondiscursive formations along with internalized constitutions of self and group conduct. In such an inquiry, a set of texts manifest a particular assemblage of these conditions. For Foucault such assemblages are historical texts that reveal in a nominalistic vein how the present comes to be. His “historical-philosophic” process inspires a more philosophical focus in this essay, one whose focus is a current assemblage. At the outset, an additional element is important to note: inquiries of this form often reveal other, different, marginalized, or missing aspects of what is taken for granted in traditional analyses. Importantly too, conditions can be potentially assembled in multiple ways.

THE CHARACTER EDUCATION MOVEMENT

Here the organizing conditions-focus is the specific configuration of the contemporary character education movement. Two aspects require mention: one is

its institutional organization and the other its literature base, including hortatory and how-to texts as well as scholarship. First, character education in the United States today comprises a huge industry of both public and private educational, governmental, and other resources.³ Its influence on the education of the nation's youth is nearly incalculable. Virtually every state in the nation has a character education initiative that has been implemented in countless districts and schools. Supported by two American presidents and the U.S. Congress, character education has come to be connected to a broader initiative in school accountability, student standardized testing, and teacher quality evaluation. Today this is usually referred to as "No Child Left Behind."⁴ Leading institutions in the movement are character education centers and projects that have been established; some are over ten years old now. Together they are part of an umbrella organization, the Character Education Partnership, located in Washington, D.C. Its principal policy document claims 1200 organizations and individuals as members.⁵ Web links demonstrate widespread impact: For example, Google recently listed over 7 million references to institutional mission statements; likewise Amazon listed over 7,300 books and book references.⁶

A text-formulated base currently responds to, supports, and critiques this vast educational enterprise. In a synthesis beyond the scope of this paper, one literature has been created for popular and practicing professional audiences by key promoters and their associates such as Thomas Lickona, Kevin Ryan, and William Bennett.⁷ Typically a case is made for a strong societal need for character education that is supported by a proposed "program." Programs range from those merely and broadly conceptual to ones more strategic with specific recommended actions. For example in a recent book, Lickona summarizes,

Our society's social and moral problems have been many years in the making and will not be easily reversed. They will require solutions supported at all levels, from local communities to the federal government. It is not yet clear whether we have the national will to do what is needed... Nevertheless character education is a good thing... for us to do. Focusing on character in our families, schools, and communities will make a difference — has already made a difference — for those involved.⁸

A second literature addresses different if overlapping audiences. Also deserving detailed attention, it is from scholars and researchers whose expertise is ethics, human development, and moral education. Exemplars of this group are Nel Noddings, Elliot Turiel, and Larry Nucci.⁹ While clearly supportive of moral education they are both in favor and critical of the specifics of the present character education movement. Taking up a concept central to this paper, Noddings offers this perspective: "I think we make a mistake if we concentrate entirely on *inculcating* certain traits or virtues. The idea... suggests... that they can become possessions."¹⁰ She adds elsewhere that a perennial question has been whether virtues can be taught and if so, how — raising issues of indoctrination, direct instruction, processes of reasoning, and basis in community.¹¹

PRESENCE OF VIRTUE

Thus far present day literatures have been mentioned as conditions of a problematization. A point of clarification: For Foucault, problematizations are not

problems in the conventional sense; rather they are “positivities.” This means that their relational effects are complex, including beneficial as well as harmful results and/or the engendering of resistances.¹² As will be seen, blame also entails this complexity. The present philosophical task is initiated by identifying one possible underlying rationality of the movement, acknowledging that this is one among others. It is, as Noddings recognizes above and “counters” in her own writings on relation, the western virtues tradition.¹³

While not named outright, consider the presence of the virtues tradition in the *Aspen Declaration of Character Education*, widely acknowledged as the founding document of the modern character education movement and serving as a mission statement for one of the principal projects. These are its eight principles.

1. The next generation will be the stewards of our communities, nation and planet in extraordinary critical times.
2. In such times, the well-being of our society requires an involved, caring citizenry with good moral character.
3. People do not automatically develop good moral character; therefore conscientious efforts must be made to help young people develop the values and abilities necessary for moral decision making and conduct.
4. Effective character education is based on core ethical values rooted in democratic society, in particular, respect, responsibility, trustworthiness, justice and fairness, caring, and civic virtue and citizenship.
5. These core ethical values transcend cultural, religious and socioeconomic differences.
6. Character education is, first and foremost, an obligation of families and faith communities, but schools and youth-service organizations also have a responsibility to help develop the character of young people.
7. These responsibilities are best achieved when these groups work in concert.
8. The character and conduct of our youth reflect the character and conduct of society, therefore, every adult has the responsibility to teach and model the core ethical values and every social institution has the responsibility to promote the development of good character.¹⁴

Herein one notes language and links surrounding character: character, values and abilities, decision making and conduct, core ethical values (again), transcending differences, character and conduct of youth and character and conduct of society, adult responsibility to teach and model core ethical values (once more), and institutional responsibility for good character. A set of values — understood as virtues — is listed as well. As described subsequently, an integral concept of virtue comes out of western ethics, its core “tradition” or rationality. The declaration also embeds other related rationalities — each part of the present problematization but potentially too as part of others. These are religious, societal or social, political, and educational.

A recent essay from advocate philosopher Christina Hoff Sommers locates the philosophical origin and perspective of the movement. The essay, entitled “How Moral Education Is Finding Its Way Back into America’s Schools” is worth presenting at some length. It begins with the presupposition that “we are just emerging from a thirty-year laissez-aller experiment in moral deregulation.”¹⁵ Her

resulting position is that since the 1970s, progressive educators have favored “a new morality” that has denied Aristotle’s moral education in favor of that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Here is a summary statement:

Progressive educators who follow Rousseau are at pains to preserve the child’s autonomy. They frown on old-fashioned moralizing, preaching, and threats of punishment, regard such methods as coercive and believe instead that children should discover for themselves, by their own rational faculties, which actions are moral.¹⁶

In the essay, Hoff Sommers utilizes the rationality of virtue in specific content. A key component is a comparison of Aristotle and Rousseau. The former, she declares, posed general principles for raising moral children that have persisted down through western history. Importantly, “even today his teachings represent common-sense opinion about child rearing.” In her view, Aristotle envisioned children as uncivilized, even barbarian, and in need of discipline. Discipline comes from moral training that children learn through socialization, appropriate punishment and reward, and practicing being good. Out of this training eventually they learn emotional control, disciplined behavior, and good reasons to be moral persons. Hoff Sommers claims that in contrast to Aristotle, Rousseau believed children to be naturally noble and virtuous; significantly he rejected the Christian doctrine of original sin that Hoff Sommers joins to the Aristotelian tradition. She writes, “Rousseau is modern in his distrust of socially ordained morals as well as in his belief that the best education elicits the child’s own authentic (benevolent) nature.” Though admirable for his humane view of child rearing, “his own recommendations have simply not proved workable.” His subsequent influence on progressives discredited “directive moral education” and, she strongly asserts, produced “value-free kids.”¹⁷

A SECOND RATIONALITY

Within the Foucauldian framework of conditions, Hoff Sommers’s essay is an explication of a virtues rationality. “Stepping back” to consider this rationality in its contexts, it also hints at something else, of another rationality: blame. One and only one use of the word points a specific finger. She writes, “Moral deregulation... [had] concrete behavioral consequences... among children in the nation’s schools.... Some of the blame can be laid at the doors of all the well-intentioned professors who helped undermine the schools’ traditional mission of morally edifying their pupils.”¹⁸

Recall now the initiating question of this essay: Should blame be part of the education of character? Rephrased a related question is whether “blame” is part of the character education movement. Another queries blame relative to the virtues tradition. An answer to the first is significant. Throughout the literature supporting the contemporary character education movement, the language of “blame” is strikingly missing. Indeed Hoff Sommers’s blame for progressive professors is a rare instantiation.¹⁹ More prevalent are these two indirect statements:

Today in America we have far too many twelve-year-olds pushing drugs, fourteen-year-olds having babies, sixteen-year-olds killing each other; and kids of all ages admitting to lying, cheating, and stealing. We have crime and violence everywhere and unethical behavior in business, the professions, and government.... We have a crisis of character all across

America that is threatening to destroy the goodness that...is the very foundation of our greatness.²⁰

The word *virtue* comes from the Latin *vir*, which has a root meaning of “force” or “agency”....The struggle for virtue is, in a way, the everyday wisdom that many of us continually forget....Virtue actually enables us to do our work better...It enables us to become better....Virtues are cultivated from within the individual and actually improve character and intelligence....Virtue is both the disposition to think, feel, and act in morally excellent ways, and the exercise of that disposition....It serves as both a means and an end of human happiness.²¹

Implied in the linking of these statements is that a crisis of character means the nonpresence of virtue, that something or more strongly that someones, individual youth in the statement above, are to “blame.”

Thus, a second rationality surfaces that itself is embedded in the character education movement. To begin again, the opposite of virtue is implied in its presence; its opposite is fault. Fault has two senses, one a personal or collective characteristic and the other a personal or collective attribution. The latter is to find fault or to blame. Just as with virtue, the concept of blame has a long history in western thought; the root of the word is the same as “blaspheme,” that, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, was introduced into Latin from the language of the New Testament.²² Blame carries connotations about fault, that is, that the censure is serious; there is charge or accusation inherent. A range of meaning exists, moreover, from scold or chide, to discredit or rebuke. Blame also entails that an individual or a collective ascribes or is ascribed blame and, as well, that something needs be done about the wrongdoing. This connects blame both with responsibility and punishment.

Taking up Foucauldian language once more, blame entails a set of conditions, a rationality, for how it has come to be constituted. For instance, in recent years psychologists have written much about blame, both in terms of social research and a contemporary cultural phenomenon of “self-help.”²³ Pertinently philosopher George Sher asserts that today a generalized avoidance or antipathy to blame exists. He writes,

[B]lame is ugly and destructive — a grim anachronism we would all be better off without. Instead of being judgmental, we are told to react to wrongdoing “by putting it behind us;” instead of condemning misbehavior, we are urged to understand its “root causes;” instead of dwelling on what cannot be changed...[because blame is generally ascribed after wrongdoing.] we are enjoined to concentrate on “healing.”²⁴

Instead of blaming, one should praise; instead of blaming one should move to taking responsibility, to preventing future wrongdoing, and to being able to praise. Herein a significant conceptual, personal, and cultural question is whether there can be responsibility without blame, especially in schools.²⁵

ABSENT/PRESENCE OF BLAME

Absence of the language of blame in the character education movement might well be seen, ironically, as a form of avoidance. “Avoidance” is thus the purview of both directive character educators and progressive social scientists and health professionals! However, avoiding the use of the language of blame does not mean

its absence from schools. Instead blame is ubiquitous in school and classroom discipline. Here is “school discipline” according to one source:

The term refers to students complying with a code of behavior often known as the school rules. Among other things these rules may set out the expected standards of clothing, timekeeping, social behavior and work ethic. The term may also be applied to the punishment that is the consequence of transgression of the code of behavior. For this reason the usage of *school discipline* sometimes means *punishment for breaking school rules* rather than behaving within the school rules.²⁶

The logic of disciplinary rules and punishments is inherently one of blame. Attribution of blame is the basis for determining who breaks rules and who is punished. Punishment in the larger society entails a related rationality, that of law. Therein blame equals culpability and, significantly, degrees of blame function rather than the more conventional binary of persons either as blameful or blameless.

Returning to the character education movement, a blame rationality is manifest in its literature. For instance, former U.S. Secretary of Education and strong proponent, Bennett, implies blame language in an absent/present formulation. He “affirms individual responsibility” through “fashioning public policies that reward right behavior and penalize wrong behavior, using all the means at our disposal...through law and moral suasion...to condemn irresponsible acts.”²⁷ In another example, Lickona argues for “moral discipline” in which teachers exercise moral authority. He writes that they are to “[try] to find the cause of a discipline problem and a solution that helps...[a] student become a...responsible member of the classroom community.”²⁸ Moreover help includes having a student “appreciate a rule’s purpose, make amends for wrongdoing, and take responsibility for improving...behavior.”²⁹ Finally, in a more recent text, Lickona makes a direct link to the virtues tradition in highlighting use of the “language of virtue” in “character-based discipline.” Herein adults in schools refer children to specific virtues in order to “correct or redirect behavior.”³⁰

Now taking problematization in a stronger Foucauldian sense, one of historical constitution, another direction reveals that societies at different times “disciplined” in other ways.³¹ One significant discussion on the history of culture is an essay from anthropologist Mary Douglas, entitled “Risk and Blame.” She reports that so called primitive societies employed a rationality of blame in which morality and danger are aligned. The context is misfortune. She writes, “for any misfortune there is a fixed repertoire of possible causes among which a possible explanation is chosen, and a fixed repertoire of obligatory actions follow on the choice. Communities and their members tend to be organized on one or another form of explanation.”³² She indicates three forms of blaming explanations for a woman’s death. One is moralistic in that she “sinned,” in some way, offended ancestors or broke a taboo. A second is adversarial in that she was not able to look out for her own interests and was bested by another. A third is attributive in that she was killed by an outside enemy. Each explanation prompts a different communal response. These range from purification rites, to compensation or vengeance. In societies exhibiting some degree of solidarity, a relatively strong system of standard diagnosis and action is evident. Douglas elaborates,

[Natural disasters,] every death and most illnesses will give scope for defining blameworthiness. Danger is defined to protect the public good and the incidence of blame is a by-product of arrangements for persuading fellow members... [of the community] to contribute to it... A common danger gives them a handle to manipulate; the threat of a community-wide pollution is a weapon for mutual coercion.³³

She continues that this “system of justice” changed as modern science promised that “real causes” could be determined. She explains, “our blaming behaviour went directly to real causes instead of being deflected to the constitution-supporting function... [of previous communities].” In her view, one result was that blame was no longer politicized. Another result, from a previous era of anthropological research, was to see such primitive societies as inferior to those of modern times. Still another was a subsequent shift in how science is viewed. Moreover, once danger was recognized in science itself another conceptual shift took place, from cause to “risk.” Douglas concludes that a new blaming system connects to a language of risk. In it, instead of discipline as in school-based blame, “the preventive action is to improve the coding of risk in the domain which has turned out to be inadequately covered.”³⁴ In society at large, this is done through risk assessment, for instance in applying statistical probabilities; in schools this is done through ameliorative character education in which the risk of blame is itself avoided.

SUMMARY

Inspired throughout by the philosophical work of Foucault, and framed specifically as a comprehensive problematization, this essay has utilized current day sources to question the rationalities underlying the contemporary character education movement in the United States. In an idiom of conditions and text assemblage, the movement was described and two rationalities revealed. One is the rationality of the virtues tradition emblematic in movement documents and, as well, in an essay from philosopher Hoff Sommers. Therein she locates a crisis of character, virtue, and education in a choice of perspective favoring Rousseau over Aristotle. She strongly prefers moral education based in the latter. Stepping back again in a Foucauldian stance reveals the absent/presence of a second rationality, a rationality of blame. Examples of writings on blame and especially its present-day avoidance are found in psychology and philosophy. While identified as missing in the character education literature, blame is nonetheless ubiquitous in movement discussions that exist alongside those of virtue, especially in school discipline. Then a second significant essay from anthropologist Douglas re-locates blame in the history of western culture.

Douglas’s essay is vital to answering the initial question, Should blame be part of the education of character? Described in her contribution is an answer: Blame has had a centuries-long presence in the education of character. While not dealing explicitly with character, nonetheless culture carries this implicit connection for membership. This link requires further philosophical and educational exploration. In sum, the problematization of this essay has revealed that the education of character cannot avoid blame and for this reason should not. How blame ought to be “educated for,” however, is also discussion for another day.³⁵

1. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: The New Press, 1990), 4.
2. Michel Foucault, "Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations," trans. Lydia Davis, in *Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth, Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 117.
3. See B. Edward McClellan's history, *Moral Education in America: Schools and the Shaping of Character from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999). A recent empirical study is from Peter Smagorinsky and Joel Taxel, *The Discourse of Character Education* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005).
4. The connection between character education and a present era of educational accountability is mentioned by Howard B. Radest, *Can We Teach Ethics?* (New York: Praeger, 1989), esp. 4.
5. A comprehensive overview of the Character Education Partnership is available through the First Amendment Center, in Charles C. Haynes and Oliver Thomas, *Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in Public Schools* (Nashville: First Amendment Center, 2002), <http://www.fac.org/PDF/FCGchapter13.PDF>.
6. These sources are <http://google.com> and <http://www.amazon.com>.
7. In addition to references cited in this essay see other examples from Edward F. DeRoche and Mary M. Williams, *Educating Hearts and Minds: A Comprehensive Character Education Framework* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin, 2001), and William Damon, ed., *Bringing in a New Era in Character Education* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2002).
8. Thomas Lickona, *Character Matters: How to Help Our Children Develop Good Judgment, Integrity, and Other Essential Virtues* (New York: Touchstone, 2004), 30.
9. See Elliot Turiel, *The Culture of Morality: Social Development, Context, and Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), and Larry Nucci, *Education in the Moral Domain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Other sources are Alex Molnar, ed., *The Construction of Children's Character: Ninety-Sixth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part II* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997); James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age Without Good and Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); and for the British context, James Arthur, *Education with Character: The Moral Economy of Schooling* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003).
10. Nel Noddings, *Educating Moral People: A Caring Alternative to Character Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002), 152.
11. See Noddings's other essays in *Educating Moral People* and "Introduction," 3–8.
12. This is best expressed in Foucault's discussions of power. See Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Power, Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984, Volume 3*, ed. J. Fabian (New York: The New Press, 2000), 326–48, as well as Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1976), 92–7.
13. Noddings, *Educating Moral People*, 3; also Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, originally 1984).
14. See the Character Counts! website, <http://www.charactercounts.org/aspn.htm>.
15. Christina Hoff Sommers, "How Moral Education Is Finding Its Way Back into America's Schools," in Damon, ed., *Bringing in a New Era in Character Education*, 24.
16. *Ibid.*, 34.
17. This discussion appears in *Ibid.*, 27, 26, 28, 29, and 30–3.
18. *Ibid.*, 33.
19. Hoff Sommers does discuss issues of socialization and discipline that are indirect references to blame.
20. Sanford N. McDonnell, "Forward," in Kevin Ryan and Karen E. Bolin, *Building Character in Schools: Practical Ways to Bring Moral Instruction to Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), x.

21. Kevin Ryan and Karen E. Bolin, *Building Character in Schools: Practical Ways to Bring Moral Instruction to Life*, 44 and 45.
22. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., s.v. "Blaspheme."
23. See for example, William J. Knaus, *Take Charge Now! Powerful Habits for Breaking the Blame Habit* (New York: John Wiley, 2000), and Kelly G. Shaver, *The Attribution of Blame: Causality, Responsibility and Blameworthiness* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1985).
24. George Sher, *In Praise of Blame* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), vii–viii.
25. Two helpful discussions of this connection are from Barbara Houston, "In Praise of Blame," *Hypatia* 7, no. 4, 128–47; and Barbara Stengel, "No-Fault Responsibility," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2006*, ed. Daniel Vokey (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2007). The first focuses on effects on agency of blame and responsibility; the second considers aspects of blame judgments that are valuable to facilitate development of responsible individuals and communities.
26. *Wikipedia*, "School Discipline," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/School_discipline (emphasis in original).
27. William J. Bennett, *The De-Valuing of America: The Fight for Our Culture and Our Children* (New York: Touchstone, 1992), 198.
28. Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility* (New York: Bantam, 1991), 111.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Lickona, *Character Matters*, 152–3. Referenced here is Linda Popov's character education program entitled The Virtues Project, at <http://www.virtuesproject.com/index.php>.
31. For another study of discipline, see Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995).
32. Mary Douglas, "Risk and Blame," in *Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 1992), 5.
33. *Ibid.*, 6.
34. Discussion here at *Ibid.*
35. A different initial consideration of youth ethics and the issues of virtue and blame is my "Asking Wrong and Right Questions: A Problematization of Youth Ethics" (Keynote Address, the Holton Lecture, delivered at the annual meeting of the South Atlantic Philosophy of Education Society, Durham, N.C., October 2006).

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