On Character Development, Career Education, and MacIntyre's *Ethics of Virtue*

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Emery J. Hyslop-Margison is concerned about career education programs that categorize character development objectives as *employability skills* or *occupational competencies*. He is worried that conceiving and pursuing character development as a form of skills education risks being either a form of moral indoctrination or simply ineffective. He recommends that career education programs re-formulate their objectives using concepts from Alasdair MacIntyre's ethics of virtue to inform a Deweyan conception of vocations. His rationale is that MacIntyre's account of the goods internal to historically situated practices and of the virtues required to achieve those goods would help career educators demonstrate the relevance of qualities of character such as honesty, courage, and justice to actual workplace situations. By demonstrating the relevance of the virtues they promote, career education programs would both (1) respect student agency in value formation and so avoid moral indoctrination and (2) improve the chances that "students will internalize desirable character traits as enduring workplace values."

I am sympathetic to Hyslop-Margison's intent to promote effective character education initiatives that respect student agency. However, I am not yet persuaded that the reforms he recommends for career education are justified. To be convinced I would need arguments and evidence to address the following questions.

IS THERE REALLY A PROBLEM WITH EXISTING CAREER EDUCATION PROGRAMS?

I see no reason why career education programs that express their desired outcomes as skills cannot help students grasp the connections between "specific personal qualities, behaviors, attitudes, and values" on the one hand and workplace situations on the other, assuming *skills* are broadly defined. Consider the Ontario curriculum document cited by Hyslop-Margison. It defines skills to include all abilities or capabilities "that can be acquired and improved with experience, practice, and training" and goes on to recommend the following "teaching approaches":

> Helping students become self-directed, lifelong learners is a fundamental aim of the guidance and career education curriculum….Effective teaching/learning processes include tutoring, direct instruction, one-on-one teaching, guided learning, experiential learning, cooperative learning, role playing, case studies, and the Socratic method. A particularly effective approach is the continuous inquiry process, through which students learn how to define and investigate critical questions and issues. In exploring these issues, students learn how to work independently and with others, how to draw conclusions and construct solutions, how to take responsible action, and how to reflect upon actions taken.[1]

Of course, drafting idealistic curriculum guidelines is one thing; implementing them quite another. But this very possibility that curriculum documents only marginally affect what educators actually do puts the onus on Hyslop-Margison to show that the language of skills and competencies leads to morally or pedagogically suspect teaching in career education programs. At the least, his claim that virtue ethics can

improve instruction in existing programs requires Hyslop-Margison to provide an assessment of their teaching as a baseline for comparison.

DOES THE NOTION OF GOODS INTERNAL TO PRACTICES AVOID MORAL RELATIVISM?

Let us suppose that Hyslop-Margison's concerns about skills-oriented career education programs turn out to be justified. Would MacIntyre's ethics provide the conceptual resources he needs to address those concerns? The first difficulty I see is that Hyslop-Margison puts more weight upon the notion of goods internal to practices than it was intended to bear. He states that "Any coherent account of virtue, in MacIntyre's view, must be connected to historically situated practices because they supply a telos to direct human action." He also observes that "MacIntyre defines virtue as 'an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.'" What Hyslop-Margison does not add is that, later in the same chapter, MacIntyre clearly states that this definition of virtue is incomplete in part because the goods internal to practices do *not* represent the *telos* of moral inquiry that rescues virtue ethics from relativism. For one thing, it does not follow from the stipulation that internal goods are sought for their own sake that those ends are morally good. They could be morally neutral, immoral, or even evil.[2] For another thing, internal goods can conflict in the sense that pursuit of one precludes achievement of another. MacIntyre submits that, to rescue moral life from "a certain subversive arbitrariness," there must be "a *telos* which transcends the limited goods of practices by constituting the good of a whole human life, the good of a human life conceived as a unity" (*AV*, 201-3). In other words, one or another vision of an "overriding good" is required to rank order the various practices and their internal goods. This point brings me to my third question:

CAN VIRTUE ETHICS HELP CAREER EDUCATORS RESPECT STUDENT AGENCY?

Hyslop-Margison recommends that career educators respect student agency by justifying their character development objectives in terms of the connections between behaving virtuously and achieving the goods internal to particular practices. One difficulty with this is that, as Hyslop-Margison himself observes, one can only appreciate the goods internal to a specific practice—and so the point of the corresponding virtues—*after* one has undergone a period of initiation into that practice during which one accepts the authority of the corresponding tradition (*AV*, 190).[3] Moreover, as noted above, pursuit of the goods internal to particular practices is only rationally justified within MacIntyre's virtue ethics with reference to the final end or *telos* of human life. Apparently, then, career educators adopting MacIntyre's ethics of virtue must eventually justify the particular character development objectives of their programs with reference to Thomistic Catholic theology, which is what MacIntyre adopts to replace Aristotle's biological essentialism.

In response to these objections, Hyslop-Margison could argue that career educators only need borrow MacIntyre's argument that certain acquired human qualities—in particular, justice, courage, and honesty—are necessary to achieve the goods internal to *any* vocation or practice (*AV*, 191). On this view, jobs should be depicted as vocations with internal goods in order to illustrate how cultivating these

virtues (and perhaps others such as integrity) promotes genuine workplace satisfaction; and how neglecting them "not only excludes practitioners from procuring the Goods Internal, but corrupts the standards of excellence within the practice."

I am uneasy about this educational proposal if it assumes that the moral virtues are rationally justified primarily in terms of their instrumental value, for I see this as a counter-productive departure from Aristotle's ethics.[4] On the other hand, I agree with MacIntyre that practices and communities cannot be sustained without the exercise of the virtues, and I would count it a great educational achievement if career education students also came to see this clearly. In the end, I would support Hyslop-Margison's proposal with this reservation: depicting jobs as vocations may not be enough to support student agency. I worry that Hyslop-Margison passes over too quickly the potential conflict between such virtues as honesty and justice and the dispositions required to function productively within a market economy culture that emphasizes "managerial reasoning and external goods at the expense of all other considerations."[5] Encouraging career education students to conceive jobs as vocations might do more harm than good if workplaces afford few opportunities for genuine autonomy. Perhaps students have good reasons to believe that, in today's marketplace, "securing a job represents little more than a means to earn an income and pursue external goods."[6] If so, career educators would have to strike a balance between helping students develop the dispositions they will need to succeed in a profit-driven economy and helping them cultivate the virtues they will need to change it. What conceptual resources does MacIntyre's ethics afford students intent upon economic reform? Perhaps this is the most important question raised by Hyslop-Margison's manifestly thought-provoking essay on character development and career education.

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1. Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, *Guidance and Career Education* <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/curricul/secondary/guidance/guidful.html> (01 November 2001), 5.

2. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 187, 199-200. For all subsequent references, this text will be cited as *AV*.

3. Indeed, it is an open question whether the emphasis upon habituation in Aristotelian programs of character development is consistent with the kind of respect for student autonomy prized within modern liberal theories of moral education.

4. Daniel Vokey, *Moral Discourse in a Pluralistic World* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 192-96.

5. To illustrate this potential conflict, one might propose that the virtues required to participate productively in a genuinely collaborative community of scholarly enquiry are not the same dispositions as those required to win academic appointment or tenure competitions.

6. MacIntyre argues that, while the exercise of certain virtues is required for the flourishing of practices within institutional frameworks, it is also true that certain types of social institution are inimical to virtue (*AV*, 195-96).