

Aristotle and Robenstine on Moral Education

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Critical of contemporary programs of character education, Clark Robenstine finds resources in Aristotle for a proper understanding of the development of good character. According to Robenstine, the elements of an Aristotelian program of moral education include fostering knowledge of general moral principles, the ability to apply the principles to particular cases, and a disposition to act as the principles require. If I understand Robenstine rightly, he holds that contemporary theorists of character education focus on the first element, namely, knowledge of what is right, and wrongly believe that this knowledge will be sufficient to generate moral action. Thus Robenstine's Aristotle would remind contemporary theorists that successful programs of character education must attend to the second and third elements as well; that is, they must develop the ability to see particular actions as required by the relevant moral principles and develop also the disposition to act as the principles imply.

I will argue that Robenstine's three elements of principles, applications, and disposition owe more to modern moral theory than to an Aristotelian account of virtue. Attention to Aristotle's account of the relationship between practical wisdom and virtue yields a significantly different perspective and sets a more complex task for the development of good character. Nevertheless, I take my comments to be a friendly amendment to Robenstine's account, expanding especially on his remark near the end of his essay that "(moral) behavior rests as much on judgment, sensitivity, and analysis as on sound moral principles."

The project of much of modern moral philosophy has been a quest for "a theory providing universal principles that apply systematically to particular cases."¹ Within this project, virtue, when given any role at all, has had the noncognitive one of supplying motivation. John Rawls, for example, construes virtues as "strong and normally effective desires to act on the basic principles of right."² From this perspective, knowledge of the good and good judgment about the particular case are separable from good character: One can know in general what is right; know what action the relevant moral principles require in a particular case; but not act. Virtue or good character, understood as a disposition to do what one believe is right, provides a practical solution to the problem of weakness of will. This is the perspective of modern moral theory, and the one Robenstine finds in Aristotle.

Aristotle, however, rejects the view that the moral life can be codified in the way presumed by modern moral theory. John McDowell summarizes what he takes to be Aristotle's position in the following way:

If one attempted to reduce one's conception of what virtue requires to a set of rules, then, however subtle and thoughtful one was in drawing up the code, cases would eventually turn up in which a mechanical application of the rules would strike one as wrong — and not necessarily because one has changed one's mind: rather, one's mind on the matter was not susceptible of capture in any universal formula."

For Aristotle, while generalizations have their place, they necessarily can capture only what is typical, and hence there are bound to be exceptions. As the definition of virtue makes plain, the ethical standard is not a rule, but the judgment of the practically wise: “Virtue is a character state concerned with choice, lying in the mean relative to us, being determined by reason and *the way the person of practical wisdom would determine it*.”⁴

But Aristotle holds not only that the virtuous must be practically wise, but also that the practically wise must be virtuous: It is not possible to be “practically wise without moral virtue.”⁵ This means that from the Aristotelian perspective, character is cognitively, and not merely motivationally, relevant (as it appears to be in modern moral theory). Practical wisdom involves a capacity to deliberate well about “what sort of things conduce to the good life in general”: Further, Aristotle says, it is not “concerned with universals only — it must only recognize the particulars.

And perception of both universal and particular are affected by virtue. “What is best,” says Aristotle, “is not evident except to the good man; for wickedness perverts us and causes us to be deceived about the starting-points of action.”⁷ Neither is proper perception of the particular likely without virtue. At issue here is what Nancy Sherman calls a capacity to “discern the particulars.” Sherman writes:

On Aristotle’s view... (p)reliminary to deciding *how* to act, one must acknowledge that the situation requires action. The decision must arise from a reading of the circumstances. This reading, or reaction, is informed by ethical considerations expressive of the agent’s virtue. Perception is thus informed by the virtues.⁸

Consider the following example. A man seated on a crowded subway notices the discomfort of a woman who stands with a small child in her arms and struggles to keep her balance as the subway jerks and twists. The question of what to do arises for the man only because a particular feature of the situation became salient for him. His perception of the woman’s discomfort was an expression of his kindness. Another man, seated nearby, may have known that one ought to be kind, but lacking the first man’s moral perception informed by his virtue, the second man remains oblivious to the need for action.⁹ As McDowell says: “Occasion by occasion, one knows what to do (if one does) not by applying universal principles but by being a certain kind of person: one who sees situations in a certain distinctive way.”¹⁰

To summarize, from the perspective of modern moral theory, good character is a disposition to act as general moral principles require in the particular case. Good character is not required for knowing what action is best, but only for performing that action. From Aristotle’s point of view, what action is best is determined by the person of practical wisdom, not by a set of rules discovered by theoretical reason. The practically wise are not merely clever in choosing means to arrive at a desired end; as virtuous persons, their affective and perceptual responses track what is truly best for humans. Their character is expressed in what they see and find pleasure in, as much as in what they do. Their character is cognitively relevant to the choices they make, to their judgment of what is best in general and in the particular case.

So how does one produce such a person? Robenstine says that Aristotle is not of much help in determining how to develop good character. But other commenta-

tors have argued, I think rightly, that Aristotle does have an account of moral education scattered throughout his writings.¹¹

In general, his view is that virtues are acquired through practice of virtuous actions. One program with the contemporary character theorists that Robenstine rightly criticizes is that they tend to understand the habituation produced through practice as mechanical reproduction of an action type; they fail to recognize the complex patterns of affective, perceptual, and deliberative discrimination and response that constitute Aristotelian virtues.

For Aristotle, this complex response pattern develops in stages. In the early stages, through performing actions in accordance with virtue, the child learns to love what is noble and hate what is base. This means, for example, that the child not only performs just actions, but comes to know that they are just and finds pleasure in performing them for that reason. Unlike the Socrates of the *Meno* who holds that knowledge is sufficient for virtue, for Aristotle, virtue requires proper training of the emotions and desires as well as of rational capacities. But as Sherman persuasively argues, even the emotional and perceptual development are not mechanical or blind: "Even at the more intermediate stages of becoming virtuous, the learner does not simply perform some action-type, as one perhaps does in developing a skill, but reacts to the circumstances, and then decides how to act."¹²

The child is thus moving toward a mature state of virtue in which virtuous actions are chosen for their own sake and with the right emotional attitudes and responses. Sherman has described the Aristotelian program as involving a "critical habituation" that develops "practical intelligence and perception in so far as these cognitive capacities are necessary for properly directed emotions, desire, and choices."¹³ For example, a parent may try to get a child to see being hurt by another child not as an assault but as an accident. Further, the parent wants the child to understand that seeing the incident as an accident should alter the anger one initially felt, and change the appropriate mode of response. Many such incidents are small steps in the development of fairness.

At latter stages, these habituated affective and perceptual attitudes and dispositions toward action will be organized and deepened through the development of reflective reason and a mature conception of the good, in other words, through the development of practical wisdom. But only one properly habituated to virtuous feeling and action is a candidate for this later training, for "argument and teaching... are not powerful with all men, but the soul of the student must first have been cultivated, by means of habits, for noble joy and noble hatred, like earth which is to nourish the seed."¹⁴

Is the Aristotelian picture one we ought to adopt? Is it useful for teachers, as Robenstine believes? I think there are reasons to be skeptical. While I find Aristotle's moral particularism philosophically sound, I wonder whether public schools can be a site for the development of Aristotelian virtue. Aristotle expects a controlled environment, a single moral community, in which early parental training is reinforced and deepened in public life through politics, arts, and culture. It is not a program clearly friendly to pluralism or diversity in moral outlook. It involves, as

Randall Curren says, “an element of compulsion” that may run contrary to the more liberal ideals of the American classroom and its, at least in theory, emphasis on cultural criticism.¹⁵ Further, the Aristotelian ideal was for a few, not the many. Women and slaves were debarred at the outset as not being capable of developing practical wisdom, and others might simply be unlucky in lacking the proper upbringing and resources that provides the necessary base for real virtue. Would we recognize “moral disability” as a new label? Will it work simply to eliminate Aristotle’s biases and extend his program to all? Or will it require considerable rethinking? These are difficult questions for which I do not have ready answers.

1. Stanley G. Clarke and Evan Simpson, “Introduction: The Primacy of Moral Practice,” in *Anti-Theory in Ethics and Moral Conservatism*, ed. Stanley G. Clark and Evan Simpson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 1.

2. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 436.

3. John McDowell, “Virtue and Reason,” in Clarke and Simpson, *Anti-Theory in Ethics*, 93.

4. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 1107a1, trans. Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character* (Oxford: Clarendon Press Oxford, 1989), p. 5. (My italics.)

5. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 1144b31-2, trans. David Ross as revised by J.L. Ackrill and J.O. Urmson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925).

6. *Ibid.*, 1140a26 and 1141b15.

7. *Ibid.*, 1144a35.

8. Sherman, *The Fabric of Character*, 29.

9. This example is adapted from an example offered by Lawrence A. Blum, *Moral Perception and Particularity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 31-34.

10. McDowell, “Virtue and Reason,” 105.

11. For example, see Sherman, *The Fabric of Character*, especially Chapter 5 and M.F. Burnyeat, “Aristotle on Learning to Be Good,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 69-92.

12. Sherman, *The Fabric of Character*, 175.

13. *Ibid.*, 155.

14. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Ross, 1179b25-30.

15. Randall R. Curren, “Justice, Instruction, and the Good: The Case for Public Education in Aristotle and Plato’s Laws II,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 12, 2-4 (1993): 111.