Dewey's Conception of "Virtue" and its Educational Implications

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INTRODUCTION

During the past decade, interest in "virtue" as a moral concept and as an educational ideal has increased dramatically. This interest is reflected in a huge number of scholarly books and articles,[1] as well as in the popular media.[2] This interest is reflected further in the many "character education" programs that have already been implemented across the country[3] and in the legislation introduced by President Clinton that would require such programs in all public schools. Because different conceptions of virtue will have different implications for students and teachers, it is important to assess the potential value of alternative conceptions of this attribute. In this paper I hope to contribute to such an assessment by discussing Dewey's particular conception of virtue and some of its educational implications.

In large measure, this paper was sparked when I found few references to Dewey in the contemporary, secondary literature on virtue;[4] and it represents my initial exploration of Dewey's writing on this topic. As such, it is not my aim here to defend (or refute) Dewey's conception of virtue. That I have tried to represent this conception in a conference paper indicates that I have come to believe that it warrants consideration and that, perhaps, it could inform contemporary educational efforts.

This paper is divided into two main sections. The first of these sections discusses the relation between "habit," "virtue," and "character," as these are conceived by Dewey; the second discusses some of the implications of Dewey's conception for educational practices.

HABIT, VIRTUE, AND CHARACTER

HABIT

In *Human Nature and Conduct*, one finds the most detailed discussion equating particular kinds of habits with "virtues."[5] In this work, as elsewhere, it is clear that Dewey's conception of habit itself differs markedly from the conception used in everyday conversation. Generally, the term "habit" carries negative connotations. In its conventional, negative sense, a habit is viewed as a routinized mode of thought or behavior that is constraining, if not utterly enslaving. Once it is recognized, a habit, conceived this way, is something that one wishes to "break."

Dewey acknowledges that some habits are undesirable in precisely the way they are generally thought to be: "A bad habit suggests an inherent tendency to action and also a hold, command over us. It makes us do things we are ashamed of, things which we tell ourselves we prefer not to do. It overrides our formal resolutions, our conscious decisions" (HNC, 21). But Dewey's discussions about bad habits are intended primarily to illustrate a point about habits in general. All habits, according to Dewey, are "dynamic," "propulsive," and "projective":

All habits are demands for certain kinds of activity; and they constitute the self. In any intelligible sense of the word will, they are will. They form our effective desires and they furnish us with our working capacities. They rule our thoughts, determining which shall appear and be strong and which shall pass from light into obscurity (HNC, 21).

While one may wish to be rid of particular habits, habits per se are not undesirable on this account. Indeed, human life itself is largely governed by habits. Our thought, language, sense perception, and even the manner in which we comport and use our bodies are all, to a considerable extent, habitual. Among the habits that one possesses, many can be seen as positively beneficial. It is not difficult to recognize the benefits of developing the habits of, say, regular study or physical exercise. But Dewey emphasizes that even very subtle habits, those that are not typically conceived *as* habits, have their advantages as well. Were sense perceptions not largely habitual, for instance, the process of trying to "make sense" daily of even our immediate surroundings would be overwhelming; "Without [such] habit there is only irritation and confused hesitation" (HNC, 126).

In this view, habits exist in interaction with both the social and physical environment: "Habits are ways of using and incorporating the environment in which the latter has its say as surely as the former" (HNC, 15). Take, for example, habits of speech. The acquisition of such habits, including language itself, presupposes a social group in which the habits are already developed by others, and in this way can be seen as an interaction between the speaker and her or his social environment. The sense in which habits, such as those involved in speech, entail an interaction between a person and her or his social environment is perhaps clearer than the sense in which habits also entail an interaction with the physical environment. A Deweyan, however, might wish to point out that the ability to speak at all requires the presence not only of certain physiological attributes (the organs of speech) but also even, literally, atmospheric conditions (sufficient oxygen, for example).

In Dewey's conception, the enactment of habit is also interactive in the sense that this influences the environment in which we live. This sort of interaction is most apparent in regard to habits concerning work on the physical environment, such as cultivating food and building shelter. But because sense perceptions and ways of thinking are also habitual, habits can be seen, in Dewey's account, as partly determining the kind of environment we can create: "[Habits] are adjustments *of* the environment, not merely *to* it" (HNC, 38). If one's habits of thought exclude imagining alternative social practices, for instance, then one will not be moved to adopt a course of action aimed at bringing an alternative into existence.

According to Dewey, once acquired, the habits animating our various activities are often latent, and are manifested only under certain circumstances: "The word 'habit'...express[es] that kind of human activity...which contains within itself a certain ordering or systemization of minor elements of action, which is projective, dynamic in quality, ready for overt manifestation; and which is operative in some subdued subordinate form even when not obviously dominating activity" (HNC, 31). To pick an example that seems widely familiar, the habits entailed in riding a bicycle remain even if one rides infrequently; that one actually has these habits becomes apparent when one does ride. This is not to say that once acquired habits will remain unchanged over time. Habits tend to be strengthened or diminished

depending on whether they are exercised regularly; and new habits are developed and old ones abandoned, typically, in Dewey's view, when one is faced with novel situations where existing habits prove inadequate.

VIRTUE

Like other habits, Dewey conceives virtues as "interactions." According to this conception, the development and consistent practice of virtue presupposes certain material and social conditions. This conceptualization differs significantly from those often represented in the popular media where the acquisition and enactment of virtues is viewed primarily as an individual affair. With enough personal effort, some seem to believe that anyone, in practically any circumstance, can acquire virtue.[6] In contrast, and in several different contexts, Dewey poses a serious challenge to the idea that the development of virtue can occur in an environment unsuited to this end:

> All virtues and vices are habits which incorporate objective forces. They are interactions of elements contributed by the make-up of an individual with elements supplied by the out-door world….Since habits involve the support of environing conditions, a society or some specific group of fellow-men, is always accessory before and after the fact (HNC, 16).

On this issue, in both *Individualism Old and New* and *Theory of the Moral Life*, Dewey illustrates how the material conditions of his time thwarted the instantiation of professed virtues, saying in the latter work: "[These virtues] cannot be made good in practice except as they are extended to include the remaking of the social environment, economic, political, international" (TML, 118).

Some may equate virtues with rather inconsequential manners or customs. But according to Dewey, virtues are positively enabling: "Virtues are ends because they are such important means. To be honest, courageous, kindly is to be in the way of producing specific natural goods or satisfactory fulfillments" (HNC, 35-36). According to this conception, having developed certain virtues, humans are able to accomplish results that, otherwise, they could not. Patience and perseverance, for example, enable one to complete difficult tasks, while lessening the sense of frustration when set-backs occur.

Virtues are widely conceived as distinctively moral qualities in contrast to qualities that have no moral significance. But in much of Dewey's writing, there is no such distinction. This is because Dewey challenges the idea that there is a clear line dividing phenomena that have moral significance from those that do not: "The serious matter is that…[the] distinction between the moral and the non-moral has been solidified into a fixed and absolute distinction, so that some acts are popularly regarded as forever within and others forever without the moral domain" (HNC, 31). Rather than differentiating between moral and non-moral realms, Dewey argues that potentially any act can be morally significant: "At any moment conceptions which once seemed to belong exclusively to the biological realm may assume moral import….Any restriction of moral knowledge and judgments to a definite realm necessarily limits our perception of moral significance" (TML, 144).

Because Dewey sees the moral in relation to concrete human practices, what is actually entailed in being virtuous will differ somewhat over time and according to circumstance. Thus, the meaning and significance of different virtues cannot be

specified once and for all: "Chastity, kindness, honesty, patriotism, modesty, toleration, bravery, etc, cannot be given a fixed meaning, because each expresses an interest in objects and institutions which are changing….No two communities conceive the objects to which these qualities attach in quite identical ways" (TML, 112-113).

The variability of what may be entailed in acting virtuously is most apparent when one adopts an historical perspective, as the work of Nussbaum, among others, illustrates.[7] Reflection on the virtue of "generosity" may help to clarify this point. In our society, where there is considerable economic inequality, one clear manifestation of generosity is the giving of material aid to those who are rendered unable to meet their own needs; what it means to be "generous" is partly determined by our particular economy. In a society not characterized by such disparity, "generosity" may still be considered a virtue, but it would be manifested differently, perhaps by the sharing of ideas or other non-material resources. In both cases, "generosity" would still be recognized as a virtue, even though the virtue is exercised differently in relation to different economic arrangements.

The relative malleability of what will constitute virtue is reflected in Dewey's own writing. Unlike authors who offer lists of eternal virtues, Dewey refers to different virtues in different works, depending on the question at hand. Thus, for example, in one chapter of *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey emphasizes honesty, courage, and kindness (35-36), and in another he stresses curiosity, caution, and respect for others (136); in *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, he emphasizes sympathy, sensitivity, and persistence.[8]

CHARACTER

In Dewey's view, habits exist in a complex, web-like relation in which any particular habit is shaped by, and helps to shape, other habits. Dewey uses the term "interpenetration" to describe this relation. According to this view, even relatively simple activities, such as riding a bicycle, involve the interaction of numerous perceptual, intellectual, and physical habits. When an experienced bicyclist *sees* a steep hill in the distance, she will likely *decide* to gain momentum and then *pedal* harder. Ascending the slope with relative ease entails the interaction of all three kinds of habits. Different habits, such as those possessed by a child just learning to ride, would quite likely produce different results.

The interpenetration of habits constitutes "character":

> Were it not for the continued operation of all habits in every act, no such thing as character could exist. There would be simply a bundle, an untied bundle at that, of isolated acts. Character is the interpenetration of habits. If each habit existed in an isolated compartment and operated without affecting, or being affected by others, character would not exist. That is conduct would lack unity being only a juxtaposition of disconnected reactions to separate situations (HNC, 29-30).

It would be a mistake to equate this view with those in which "character" is seen as constituting persons' "true" or "essential" selves. The habits that interact to form character, recall, incorporate aspects of the physical and social environment in which individuals live; when individuals' life situations change, so, to a certain extent, does their character. In extreme cases, greatly worsened circumstances may

leave an individual "broken," while improved conditions may help another to become a "new person": "The attained character does not tend to petrify into a fixed possession which resists the response to needs that grow out of the…environment. It is plastic to new wants and demands."[9] While Dewey views character as being relatively malleable, he does not believe that, generally speaking, it is infinitely so; the very idea of "character" assumes that individuals develop *characteristic* ways of thinking and acting. In Dewey's view, what makes the development of such characteristics possible are continuities between different contexts. Typically, the situations in which we participate share certain characteristics, and even in new situations we often find at least a few elements similar to those that are familiar.

In light of his understanding of the significance of environment to the formation habits and character, it is not surprising that Dewey is sharply critical of the idea that particular kinds of character will result from legislative or other mandates: "The man who feels that *his* virtues are his own personal accomplishments is likely to be also the one who thinks that by passing laws he can throw the fear of God into others and make them virtuous by edict and prohibitory mandate" (HNC, 23). Then, addressing the question of how a society might improve the character of its citizens, Dewey argues:

> Until we know the conditions which have helped form the characters we approve and disapprove, our efforts to create the one and do away with the other will be blind and halting.….The moral problem is that of modifying the factors which now influence future results. To change the working character or will of another we have to alter objective conditions which enter into his habits (HNC, 18).

The *virtuous* character is one in which *virtuous* habits exist in this complex interpenetration, a point that is reiterated in all Dewey's work on this subject:

> The mere idea of a catalog of virtues commits us to the notion that virtues may be kept apart, pigeon-holed in water-tight compartments. In fact virtuous traits interpenetrate one another; this unity is involved in the very idea of integrity of character (TML, 115).

Stating the matter negatively, Dewey argues that it may be undesirable to behave in accord with conceptions in which virtues are seen as discrete qualities:

> The supposition that virtues are separated from one another leads, when acted upon, to that narrowing and hardening of action which induces many persons to conceive of all morality as negative and restrictive….Is justice thought of as an isolated virtue? Then it takes on a mechanical and quantitative form, like the exact meting out of praise and blame, reward and punishment. Or it is thought of as a vindication of abstract and impersonal law — an attitude which always tends to make men vindictive and leads them to justify their harshness as a virtue (TML, 115-116).[10]

While the good character is one in which virtues exist in interpenetration, Dewey argues that there are times when acting virtuously will entail the outward manifestation of certain virtues, but not others. Much depends on the circumstances at hand:

> At one time persistence and endurance in the face of obstacles is the most prominent feature; then the attitude is the excellence called courage. At another time, the trait of impartiality and equity is uppermost, and we call it justice. At other times, the necessity for subordinating immediate satisfaction of a strong appetite or desire to a comprehensive good is the conspicuous feature. Then the disposition is denominated temperance, self-control. When the prominent phase is the need for thoughtfulness, for consecutive and persistent attention, in order that these other qualities may function, the interest receives the name of moral wisdom, insight, conscientiousness. In each case the difference is one of emphasis only (TML, 115).

By viewing the virtuous character in terms of an interrelated complex of attributes, one can see why, on Dewey's account, the exercise of virtue does not require such an intuitively problematic response as a bland attitude of "tolerance" toward, for example, racial discrimination. In the virtuous character, a single virtue such as "tolerance" exists in relation with "justice," among other virtues. A person who is tolerant *and* just may choose to assert his or her opposition to a perceived injustice without diminishing either virtue; generally, a person who refuses to tolerate oppression and other wrongs is not considered "intolerant." On this issue, Dewey is consistent with contemporary philosophers who see the different virtues as modifying and balancing one another.[11]

<center>EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS</center>

In the few passages where Dewey addresses moral education specifically (in contrast to education generally), he tends to emphasize the practices to which he is opposed, rather than positive alternatives. Above all, Dewey seems opposed to didacticism:

> Lessons about morals signify as matter of course lessons in what other people think about virtues and duties. It amounts to something only in the degree in which pupils happen already to be animated by a sympathetic and dignified regard for the sentiments of others. Without such regard, it has no more influence on character than information about the mountains of Asia.[12]

If a teacher's instruction is generally consistent with other moral lessons the child has truly learned, then it may serve to reinforce these; otherwise, such instruction will be of little positive consequence. In one passage, Dewey suggests that there is even a potential danger in *merely* giving didactic instruction, and criticizes those who engage in this practice: "They overlook the danger that standards so taught will be merely symbolic; that is, largely conventional and verbal."[13] Dewey's concern is that, taught didactically, students may learn to exhibit the conventions of morality, while lacking that which is more genuine and substantive. A child who has cultivated only the appearance of virtue will be ill-prepared to develop the keen sensitivity and capacity for reflection and judgment that more mature virtue requires.

As a corollary, Dewey is opposed to attending to moral education apart from the rest of schooling, which may account for the fact that he infrequently singles out moral education a special topic: "Moral education in school is practically hopeless when we set up the development of character as the supreme end, and at the same time treat the acquiring of knowledge and the development of understanding, which of necessity occupy the chief part of school time, as having to nothing to do with character."[14] All education in Dewey's conception is "moral education" to the extent that it enables students to participate more actively and meaningfully in social life. When taught in such a way that they serve this end, history, the sciences, mathematics, and other regular school subjects can be viewed as aspects of moral education:

> Just because the studies of the curriculum represent standard factors in social life, they are organs of initiation into social values. As mere school studies, their acquisition has only technical worth. Acquired under conditions where their social significance is realized, they feed moral interest and develop moral insight.[15]

These criticisms of existing practices have implication for how, to Dewey's mind, moral education ought to be conceived and practiced — implications that are

consistent, first, with his idea that virtues, like habits generally, develop and are sustained in interaction with the physical and social environment. Indeed, Dewey argues that the school environment is the only facet of the educational process under teachers' control: "The educator's part in the enterprise of education is to furnish the environment which stimulates responses and directs the learner's course. In last analysis, *all* that the educator can do is modify stimuli so that response will as surely as is possible result in the formation of desirable intellectual and emotional dispositions."[16] If schools are going to nurture good character, then there is a need above all to attend to the quality of the social relations they facilitate and the material conditions that partly sustain these relations.

One typically thinks of the school or classroom environment in terms of physical space. But as Dewey conceives it, the environment is far more inclusive:

> [The environment] includes what is done by the educator and the way in which it is done, not only words spoken but the tone of voice in which they are spoken. It includes equipment, books, apparatus, toys, games played. It includes the materials with which an individual interacts, and, most important of all, the total social set-up of the situations in which a person is engaged.[17]

Thus while teachers cannot guarantee the development of virtue or good character, their potential contribution to this end is significant; and clearly, as indicated in the passage immediately above, the Deweyan teacher would have many more decision-making responsibilities than do most teachers today.

Dewey's criticisms of the moral education of this time are also consistent with his recommendations for education generally. Dewey argues repeatedly that an environment conducive to the sort of moral education he endorses is one that facilitates students' participation in active "occupations." While the term "occupation" may conjure the image of a vocational education program designed to prepare students for employment in a specific job, this is not what Dewey has in mind: "By occupation I mean a mode of activity on the part of the child which reproduces, or runs parallel to, some form of work carried on in social life….Occupation as thus conceived must, therefore, be carefully distinguished from work which educates primarily for a trade."[18] While the occupations Dewey describes, including cooking, sewing and weaving, and woodworking, appear to be vocational in the traditional sense, to him, their main value lies elsewhere. Participation in these occupations does enable students to develop certain technical skills, as well as to acquire knowledge that is embodied in regular school subjects, such as history and the sciences. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey states unequivocally that he believes that the deeper value of these occupations is moral: "What is learned and employed in an occupation having an aim and involving cooperation with others is moral knowledge, whether consciously so regarded or not. For it builds up a social interest and confers the intelligence needed to make that interest effective in practice."[19]

CONTEMPORARY EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

In the foreseeable future, it is highly unlikely that many schools will be reorganized to accommodate occupations, as Dewey conceives these. But even lacking this sort of change, his work has positive implications for contemporary moral education in the schools. A modern Deweyan would try to encourage

activities and social relations that themselves support the development and practice of desired character traits. This could include the reading of "moral texts" (fables and other stories thought to exemplify virtue) upon which some contemporary approaches are largely based,[20] but it would also include elements intended to engage students and teachers in ways that are more obviously active and participatory. As suggested above, what most clearly distinguishes the Deweyan classroom from others also designed to promote good character is that such a classroom would reflect the understanding that all of its aspects have moral significance. Character education would not be addressed in special courses, or as a mere supplement to "regular" courses. For a Deweyan, the curriculum, teaching methods, the organization of time and physical space, would all reflect a concern for character development.

While Dewey does suggest ways in which moral education might be addressed in contemporary classrooms, a potentially more profound contribution lies in his argument that schools alone cannot foster virtue. Dewey urges us to consider the educational potential of all our institutions. Virtue on his account, recall, develops and is sustained in interaction with the whole of one's physical and social environment; it cannot be merely willed into existence lacking certain conditions. The school constitutes only a part of children's environment, and the other environments in which they participate will also bear on the development of character. Children live most of their lives outside of school among friends and family members engaging in a wide variety of activities, and the quality of these relations and activities will promote or hinder the development of different virtues. This is one reason why Dewey emphasizes repeatedly that engendering virtues and good character, from childhood on, requires social, political, and economic arrangements that are suited to this end. Thus if Dewey were to influence contemporary policy makers and politicians who assert that we are suffering a nation-wide crisis in character, then their efforts would likely include reform of all such arrangements, not merely select elements of the schools' curricula.

1. See, for example, Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility* (New York: Bantam, 1991); Robert T. Sandin, *The Rehabilitation of Virtue: Foundations of Moral Education* (New York: Praeger, 1992); Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character: Aristotle's Theory of Virtue* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989); David T. Hansen, "The Emergence of a Shared Morality in a Classroom," *Curriculum Inquiry* 22 (1992): 345-61; M. F. Burnyeat, "Aristotle on Learning to be Good," *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); and Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).

2. The more prominent discussions about this topic appearing in popular print include a cover article in *Newsweek* (June 13, 1994); a week-long series of Gary Trudeau's "Doonesbury!" and, of course, William J. Bennett's *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), which has sold over a million copies.

3. For a description of several such programs see, for example, Jacques S. Benninga, ed., *Moral, Character, and Civic Education in the Elementary School* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1991).

4. An important exception is found in Betty A. Sichel, *Moral Education: Character, Community, and Ideals* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1988); see also J.J. Chambliss, "Common Ground in Aristotle's and Dewey's Theories of Conduct," *Educational Theory* 43, no. 2 (1993): 249-60.

5. *Human Nature and Conduct*, in *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, 1899-1924, vol. 14, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988). Henceforth, *Human Nature and Conduct* will be identified in the text as "HNC."

6. For a contemporary criticism of this view see, for example, Mary S. Leach, "Can We Talk? A Response to Burbules and Rice," *Harvard Educational Review* 62, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 257-63.

7. Martha C. Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XIII (1988): 32-52; see also, for example, David Carr, *Educating the Virtues* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 6-7.

8. *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 174.

9. "Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics" in *John Dewey: The Early Works, 1889-1898*, vol. 3, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), 386.

10. See also, for example, John Dewey, *The Study of Ethics: A Syllabus* (Ann Arbor, MI: George Wahr, 1897), 138-39; *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1944), 358; and *Human Nature and Conduct*, 136.

11. Amelie O. Rorty, "Virtues and the Vicissitudes," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XIII (1988): 142.

12. *Democracy and Education*, 354.

13. Ibid., 234.

14. Ibid., 354.

15. Ibid., 356.

16. Ibid., 180.

17. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 45.

18. John Dewey, *The School and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 132-33; this work provides several descriptions of occupations, as does John Dewey, "Schools of To-morrow," in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, vol. 8, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985).

19. *Democracy and Education*, 356.

20. Bennett in *The Book of Virtues* and Nussbaum in *The Fragility of Goodness* emphasize moral texts.