

Character Education After the Bandwagon has Gone

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Paper presented in, L. Nucci (Chair), Developmental perspectives and approaches to character education. Symposium conducted at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, March 1997.

In his January (1997) State of the Union Address, marking the start of his second term of office, President William Clinton made specific reference to fostering children's character as a national priority for public education. President Clinton's elevation of character education as a concern of the United States federal government was historic. It seemingly swept aside decades old debates about concerns over constitutional entanglements regarding freedom of speech and the separation of church and state, and appeared to assume common agreement over previously contentious issues about the nature and sources of moral character. As people who have spent decades engaged in research on children's moral development and moral education, we are understandably reluctant to appear critical of an event in social policy that many of us have wished for some time. **But as the Chinese proverb says: "Be careful what you wish for, because it may come true." We find ourselves asking about this national interest in morality and character, "Why now?; Why at this time?".** Why, for example, in 1997 does a book about children's morality by the psychiatrist Michael Coles receive national media attention? And what do all of these different people mean by morality and character anyway?

With regard to the latter question, we are not alone in our concerns. The term "character education" has in recent years become the label of choice for public discourse around the range of curricular or policy activities having to do with students' value formation. Historically, however, character education has had a particular meaning and has been associated with traditional assumptions and approaches to fostering of virtues and traditional values in students. In a recent article, Kevin Ryan (1996), a leading contemporary writer from the traditional character education perspective, has been sharply critical of what he calls the "**character education bandwagon**" and has taken care to enumerate what character education is not. In clarifying what character education is, Ryan makes clear that it does not include

efforts to stimulate moral development. Cognitive developmentalists whether Kohlbergian or whatever, need not apply. From the perspective held by the developmentalists in this symposium, Ryan's efforts at clarity are deeply appreciated. For, just as he is troubled by the broad based use of a term historically reserved for a particular traditionalist approach and viewpoint, we are troubled by the likelihood that the current fascination with character education will serve as political cover for the imposition of a particular cultural agenda, and return to narrow indoctrinative pedagogy, rather than a flourishing of educational practices and contexts likely to lead to genuine moral growth. For the latter to occur, we need to be willing to critically examine some of the underlying assumptions about society being used in support of the character education agenda, to critically examine the assumptions about moral virtue and character being proffered in traditionalist accounts, and to provide a more comprehensive and integrative approach to moral education and character formation that will remain well after the bandwagon has gone.

Why Now?

Perhaps Ed Wynne's (1987, p. 56) assessment that, "**By many measures youth conduct was at its best in 1955.**", most aptly captures the motivating sentiment behind the current surge of interest in character education. A pervasive theme in writings during the latter part of the 1980s and into the 1990s about American culture is that the society is in moral crisis and undergoing serious decay. As the following sampling shows, there is a spate of books and essays written by social commentators and scientists with titles that announce the sense of felt moral decline in the land: The Devaluing of America (William Bennet); The Closing of the American Mind, (Alan Bloom); The Spirit of Community: The Reinvention of American Society (Amatai Etzioni); The Demoralization of Society (Himmelfarb); and "The Declining Character of American Youth (Edward Wynne). Many causes have been attributed to the supposed moral decay in American culture. Among the most prominent and most frequently stated are: changes in the structure of the family; the effects of the culture of the 1960s, with its emphasis on freedom, sex, and drugs; a failure to attend to traditions; a questioning of traditions; the way youth have been morally educated in the schools; the failure of universities to provide adequate education; too much of an emphasis on rights; the onset of radical individualism; the influences of feminism; and the teachings of elites (such as the members of this audience) who create theories hostile to the ideas of virtue, character, and the language of morality.

Claims of moral crisis, cultural degeneration, and calls for change come from many quarters, including from those with somewhat different theoretical orientations to the nature of morality and its acquisition. Some, such as Ed Wynne, Bill Bennett, and Kevin Ryan, explicitly take the position that there are necessary moral virtues

reflected in the fabric of cultures and its traditions, and that American culture has lost its way by losing sight of those traditions. For the most part, in these views it is maintained that the moral development of individuals entails a process of acquiring general traits of character and habits consistent with cultural traditions (e.g., Bennett, 1992; Bennett & Delattre, 1978; Ryan, 1989; Wynne, 1987). It is further asserted that in contemporary times cultural traditions have been displaced, to the detriment of the moral order, by concerns with individual needs and the priority given to personal gratification over community interests.

These visions of moral decay are also shared by some writers who do not hold to the notion of universal moral virtues or standards, but who nonetheless perceive current American society as in moral peril. For instance, Etzioni (1993, p. 12) claims that because of a waning of traditional values, without the affirmation of new values, "**we live in a state of everlasting moral confusion and social anarchy.**" The effects of "radical individualism," representing a departure from the past's balance of autonomy and commitment to a moral order, are according to Robert Bellah and his colleagues (1985, p. 284), that "we seem to be hovering on the brink of disaster." These writers believe that American "individualism may have grown cancerous" (p.vii), and inquire "how can we reverse the slide toward the abyss"(p.. 284). To put it in the terms of popular culture, it would appear that if Etzioni and the Bellah group are right, the "baby boomers" who came of age in the 1960s, failed to heed the words of Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young when they urged those "who are on the road (to) craft a code that we can live by."

The strength and urgency of these types of concerns suggest a serious deterioration of the moral state in late twentieth century America relative to other cultures and previous times. **Yet, it is striking that in other places, and at other times in the United States, similar language was invoked to describe society. For example, a decline in the morality of youth was also a major theme in American social commentaries during the 1920s - a time that contemporary bemoaners of societal decay point to positively as one in which American traditions and values prevailed.** As detailed and documented by Fass (1977), many during that period were convinced that, especially because of the attitudes and behaviors of youth, there was serious social disorder and cultural disintegration. As a consequence of changes in the family, schools, and church, entailing a loosening of authority and their replacement with "undisciplined individualism", personal liberties and rights, and self-gratification, traditional values and a sense of community were being undermined. Referring to those who viewed society in the 1920s as undergoing moral crisis, Fass (1977, p. 15) stated that: " the young represented the fruit of social disorder, cultural disintegration, and a personal loss of coherence. They viewed the present from the perspective of what they believed was a formerly stable society which had been

shattered, and they taunted themselves with the loss that came with change." Again, it was perceived that there were alarming increases in juvenile crime rates, which were attributed to the erosion of the family unit (Fass, 1977, p.99).

In the 1920s, however, the view that the culture was in disintegration due to the ways of youth was not the only perspective. At the time, some welcomed the changes in attitudes, behaviors, and in the structure of the family, schools, and church. They believed that there was occurring a progressive moral reorganization of society, through which the old order was being transformed into a more just system with legitimate individual freedoms and more healthy social relationships (Fass, 1977). Disagreements of this sort also exist in contemporary times. Several of the causes attributed to a moral decline by those who see cultural disintegration are events that others view as furthering moral and societal ends. For example, events in the 1960s, seen by some as having a negative effect, are regarded by others as representing movements toward effecting moral change (specifically, the end of the "unjust" war in Vietnam, achieving greater civil rights for African-Americans, and reducing poverty). Similarly, whereas some regard feminism and the assertion of "too many" rights to have negative effects, others see moral progress in achieving greater justice for women (Okin, 1989) and rights for groups faced with discrimination.

Indeed, if we go back to Ed Wynne's 1955 date of recent idyllic America, we see cultural cross currents emerging that typify the "looking glass" aspect of efforts to characterize social change in terms of moral decay. In looking over the events of that period in the mid-1950s, we find that they include the landmark Supreme Court decision striking down separate but equal schooling for Black and White children, as well as such popular culture milestones as Elvis Presley's first appearance on the Ed Sullivan show. Both events represent change, but of different kinds. In one case, we see shifts in the ways in which the conventions of public behavior, of self expression, and sexuality are manifest. In the other, an effort to redress racial intolerance and injustice. And in the often subtle ways in which such changes interact we see the blending of White and African-American culture introduced by media through Elvis Presley to a mainstream audience at a time when issues of racial segregation were being addressed by the nation's highest court.

What does all this mean? Does it merely show that in many epochs there are disgruntled people who go public with their complaints? Perhaps! But, it can be argued that the phenomena of continual critiques and counter critiques of one's culture, reflect neglected but salient aspects of culture: that within a society, there are deep disagreements about cultural practices and about the perceived nature and course of the culture; that such disagreements in part, stem from a multiplicity of social orientations and goals held by members of a culture; that members of a culture, along

with accepting its practices, can find serious moral failings in it; that along with cultural harmony there is a fair amount of conflict within a culture due to varying views and, especially, due to people's varying perspectives in roles, status, privileges and burdens within the organization of the society; and that cultures are usually undergoing, in part, internally regulated changes -- changes which result in negative and positive evaluations. Those claims of moral crisis and degeneration reflect disagreements and conflicts -- an historical dialectic among those who critique cultural practices and counter-critique the critiques.

The types of ubiquitous concerns with moral crisis and cultural disintegration considered above have a great deal to do with perceptions of changes in cultural identity and way of life -- changes regarded by some as negative and others as positive. Moreover, the concerns with moral crises often reflect generational conflicts and, thereby, illustrate, as the cultural anthropologist Claudia Strauss (1992, p.8) has noted, that cultural values and practices are not simply transmitted from generation to generation: "This is not a simple problem of 'noise' in the fax line from the public social order to individuals' psyches causing imperfect copies. Transmission is more complicated than this because the social order is more complicated than this. If our cultural-ideological milieus were unchanging, unambiguous, and internally consistent, there would be no need to study how social messages are appropriated by individual minds...yet, as we now recognize, conflicting messages, ambiguity, and change are found in all societies, even 'traditional' ones."

Questionable Virtue

If the perception of the present as a time of moral decay is overdrawn, it is not the case that the present era is without problems. Violence, substance abuse, and other problems are not a fiction concocted by political conservatives or traditional character educators. Such problems are real, and should be addressed. Our common ground with traditional character education is and should be around questions of how best to contribute to educational practice, and to societal changes that will address such problems. And it is this common ground that allows us both to applaud the President's attention to character education in its broadest meaning. As our preceding discussion has spelled out, however, the rhetoric of moral crisis which has resulted in public attention to issues of moral education is rooted in theories of socialization which reduce the problem to one of restoring society to a period of social tranquillity associated with traditional social structure, and of instilling within children a set of values and virtues which will guide their conduct. The problem of such an approach at a societal level is the transparent cultural hegemony engendered by any attempt to "turn back the clock" without seriously taking into account the social justice concerns that are often at play in shifts in social arrangements and societal organization. We

have addressed these issues in our preceding discussion. What we wish to address at this point is the second, related aspect of the call to character education, which is the renewed interest in virtue centered or eudaemonic theories of character formation.

In virtue-centered moral theories, moral right and wrong is typically defined in terms of the character of agents. Virtue is defined as an excellence or moral good, that is related in some way to conceptions of human flourishing (eudaemonia) or the "good life". Agent's pursuit of virtue is seen as good to the extent that it improves human personality or character and contributes to the general good. In many virtue-centered accounts, including Aristotle's, virtue is believed to be acquired by habit or practice. Individuals learn the good by doing the good. Thus, it is not difficult to see why virtue moralities have characteristically provided the moral philosophical underpinnings of character education approaches to moral development.

While it is not the place here to offer an extensive critique of virtue-based theories of morality (for one such critique see Helwig, Turiel, & Nucci, 1996), we would like to raise some issues surrounding virtue-centered conceptions of the moral good that seem most relevant to contemporary character education theorizing. These issues, in our view, have not been given the attention they deserve, and we would suggest in some cases that virtue-based accounts of morality are insufficient by themselves to account for the diversity of moral conceptions exhibited by individuals in both Western and non-Western cultures. One issue concerns the definition of the core set of virtues deemed to be morally good or praiseworthy, and its cultural universality. The problem of the relativity of any set of moral concepts is, of course, not unique to virtue centered moralities, as the extensive body of relativistic critiques of Kantian or other non-virtue-based moral theories attests. But the problem of moral relativism may be especially acute for virtue based moralities as a result of the tendency in these approaches to define morality in relation to features of character and the self in these approaches.

And, indeed, specific attempts to define the virtues have yielded a considerable amount of variability, among both philosophers, professional educators, and laypersons. Although some virtues appear to be common to many lists, including such virtues as honesty, justice, wisdom, and courage, other virtues appearing on individual lists have little in common. For example, the philosopher David Hume identifies allegiance, public spirit, perseverance, secrecy, order, and chastity as virtues (Hume, 1983, cited in Zagzebski, 1996). Among Asian philosophers (e.g., Confucius), the virtue of filial piety ranks very highly, while Aristotle discusses "magnificence" as a valued trait, along with conversational ability, practical abilities such as the management of money, wit, and aesthetic abilities (Zagzebski, 1996).

Contemporary conceptions of the virtues show similar variability, even as applied within specific social contexts, such as educational settings. **Lapsley (1996) contrasts the set of 23 core values endorsed by the Panel on Moral Education formed in 1988 by the American Association for Curriculum Development with the traits of character on which he himself was evaluated on his high school report card (these include traits like accuracy, promptness, courtesy, self-control, respect for school property, effort, attitude, cooperation, and preparation) and finds that courtesy was the only value held in common among the two lists.**

Researchers working within the cognitive developmental approach have used the term "bag of virtues" (Kohlberg & Turiel, 1971; Kohlberg, 1971) to denote what they perceive as two related problems with virtue based moral theory. One is this very relativism--each theorist appears to come up with a considerably different "grab bag" of virtues depending on the varying assumptions about the good life, human functioning and flourishing held by different theorists. Secondly, the virtues that are identified are often not well-defended or grounded in argument or psychological research, at least not in ways that permit an adequate answer to charges of cultural relativism and variation. To the extent that conceptions of self and the good life can be expected to vary across cultural contexts (and, even, within cultures), virtue relativism will be a necessary outcome of any attempt to define morality in terms of traits of character.

There is a related danger in attempts to define character education under a virtue-centered approach, and this is the danger of virtue hegemony and its attendant ethnocentrism. Whose virtues are to be promoted and inculcated by state-sponsored initiatives, especially in modern pluralist societies? Character education runs the danger of promoting, under a narrow conception of morality, the inculcation of the dominant culture's perceptions of those virtues deemed worthy, while denigrating or failing to give equal consideration to alternative conceptions. This may be less of a problem for those virtues that pertain to potentially shared or sharable assumptions about how people should treat one another (e.g., justice), but when it extends to prescriptions about the socialization of the self or of values central to conceptions of a putative ideal lifestyle or the good life, those who do not share the majority's conception may feel justifiably slighted. Cultural minorities may wonder why their "bag of virtues" do not appear on the list, and character education approaches need to be able to provide them with a rationally defensible reply, or risk charges of cultural hegemony.

A further problem pertains to how the various virtues are to be coordinated or integrated in individuals' moral behavior and judgment. Among the virtues listed by

the Panel on Moral Education are loyalty and patriotism, and Aristotle lists courage as a moral virtue. This raises the question of whether these are always virtues. Consider the loyalty we have seen displayed in regions throughout the world by soldiers dutifully carrying out orders to commit atrocities against civilians, or, even, the courage of the ordinary soldier fighting in defense of an unjust regime. Clearly, acts of courage and loyalty may lose their virtuous character if applied in the service of unjust ends. More close to home, consider the virtue of patriotism, also espoused by the Panel on Moral Education. Is patriotism always a virtue? What about the resistance efforts of individuals in the United States opposed to the Vietnam war in the 1960's? Do the actions of these individuals lose their moral character to the extent that they were considered "unpatriotic"?

The point we are making here is that character-based conceptions of virtue must be embedded within a larger framework of morality as justice or fairness, and that in defining the moral, the effects that individuals' actions have on others must be considered. Aristotle himself saw justice as unique among the virtues for its "other regarding" aspect, and he gave it a prime place in his moral theory (Aristotle, 1947). To the extent that virtue centered moralities, and by implication traditional character education approaches, situate morality in the development of personality or character, they deflect attention away from important issues of justice and fairness, virtues which cannot be reduced to or explained in terms of individual-centered concepts such as "character", "personality", or "self". Nor can they answer questions about how virtues of character such as loyalty and courage are to be applied when they conflict with other-regarding moral concerns such as justice and concern for others' welfare and rights.

In sum, what is needed is an account of the development of the moral self that satisfies two important criteria. One is that it should specify which virtues are expected to be universally valid across social and cultural contexts, in contrast to those likely to be specific to particular settings and historical epochs. We have argued that certain moral values, such as justice and fairness, are likely candidates for cultural universality, and a growing body of research conducted in a variety of cultural settings has supported this claim (e.g., studies in Brazil (Nucci, Camino, & Sapiro, 1996); India (Bersoff & Miller, 1993, Madden, 1992); The Middle East (Wainryb, 1995; Wainryb & Turiel, 1994); Indonesia (Carey & Ford, 1983) Korea (Song, Smetana, & Kim, 1987), Nigeria (Hollis, Leis, & Turiel, 1987), Zambia (Zimba, 1987)). (Indeed, even relativistic theorists such as Shweder have now conceded that a morality based on justice and concern for others probably represents a universal moral code, see Shweder, 1990). Whether other, more character-based virtues (e.g., courage, chastity) are culturally universal is at present a question for future research. And whether there

exists a culturally-shared conception of the good life or human flourishing within diverse pluralistic democratic societies such as our own is certainly open to question.

A second criterion for an account of the development of the moral self is a moral theory that allows for the hierarchical integration of different virtues or prescriptions for action as applied in specific circumstances. For the reasons mentioned earlier, we have argued for a separation of the development of personality (self) and the development of moral virtues of justice and concern for others. This is not to say that these two areas do not interact in development, but it is to provide an important analytic distinction. Others, such as Blasi (e.g., 1983; 1984) and Killen (1990) have worked on the problem of the integration of the moral self with conceptions of justice, while maintaining the distinction. Our position is that a theory of virtuous action will need to be embedded within, and informed by, a larger moral theory having justice as its base, at least when virtuous behavior entails acts having effects on individuals besides the self. This will help to resolve the problem of conflicts between virtues mentioned earlier, such as that of the courageous and loyal soldier in the army of an unjust regime. It also means that the teaching of virtues associated with justice and concern for others will have to be a central part of character education programs properly conceived. This means more than teaching justice as just another virtue, simply to be added to any list of prescribed virtues. Rather, it must be a core from which certain key ethical conflicts can be identified, reasoned about, and resolved. When these two criteria are attended to, we believe the rift between traditional character education approaches and cognitive developmental theory may be closer to being mended.

What's Next?

Consideration of these criteria leads us to a different view of the state of society. Indeed, moral problems exist that need to be addressed, and moral education has been, continues to be, and will be necessary, to do well. **However, the claims of moral crisis and societal degeneration romanticize the past, obscure the present, and yield inadequate direction for what is needed. Even the basic question of how we know that society is in moral crisis remains unaddressed. We are skeptical that the claim can even be made.** This is because the vast societal changes that have occurred over the past two centuries make it very difficult to document whether or not there has been decay, improvement, or simply patterns of positive and negative changes associated with different realms of social life. To cite some salient examples of morally-relevant and often viewed as positive societal shifts, there have been changes in race relations and treatment of minority groups, in the roles, burdens, and privileges of women, in the treatment of children, in the conditions of work for children, in the work force and labor relations more generally, in care of the elderly, in

levels of political representation of many groups (including women), in numbers of people obtaining higher levels of education, and in relationships among those of higher and lower classes. As one concrete example of divergent views of these developments, consider that, on the one hand, some, like Alan Bloom, have argued that "feminism" has resulted in deterioration of the fabric of the family, and thus contributes substantially to the decay of American society. However, as Susan Moller Okin argues in her book **Gender, Justice, and the Family**, historically principles of justice and fairness have not been applied to family relationships -- where females are typically treated unfairly by males in positions of power, influence, and privilege who believe they have natural entitlements.

Instead of simply asserting that the society has gone to pot (no pun intended), we believe it is crucial to ask questions and be open to research. Many commentators today tell us they have the answer. Do this or that and the problem will be solved. Tell children all the right stories from our past and present, practice what you preach, be civil, create communities, go back to our traditions, do not emphasize rights so much, be less individualistic, parents be firm, authoritative, and stop indulging children, stand up to your children, divorce less. The lists go on and on, and lists vary from each other tremendously. Seldom is there any evidence given to support the validity of the favored method. And hardly ever, if ever, is it said, these are the reasons this or that method should work.

But these are difficult and complex problems, that in probability do not lend themselves to simple solutions. **While practitioners must in good faith carry on and act in face of this ambiguity on the basis of their best understandings of things. It is our responsibility to be sure to do good research to find out how best to address issues of how to contribute to children's moral growth and character formation long after today's bandwagon has gone.**
