

"Virtue Ethics and Moral Education" (David Carr & Jan Steutel, eds.)

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Virtue Ethics and Moral Education,
David Carr and Jan Steutel, eds.¹

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Kohlberg's disdain for the "bag of virtues" approach to moral education is a well known feature of his theory. What he would have said about the current interest in virtue ethics is anybody's guess. My own guess however, is that he would have stuck to his deontological guns while eschewing reliance on the virtues. But is it necessary to see deontology and virtue ethics as rival versions of ethical life? Apparently not, since Kant, the paradigm deontologist, elaborated a doctrine of the virtues in the second part of his Metaphysics of Morals. However, since the current interest in virtue ethics stems from a certain dissatisfaction with Kantian deontology as well as with utilitarianism, it might be worthwhile, in order to understand the distinctiveness of a virtue approach to moral education, to draw a contrast between deontology, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics.

David Carr and Jan Steutel, as editors of Virtue Ethics and Moral Education, have provided, in the introduction to this collection of essays, just such a characterization of virtue ethics while also indicating some of the variations that can occur within a virtue ethics construed non-deontologically and as non-utilitarian. So for example, while deontological theories consider concepts such as "ought", "right", "wrong", etc. as basic to moral judgements, virtue theories employ as basic, certain aretaic concepts such as "good", "admirable", "courageous", "honest", etc. However, virtue theories may differ from one another according to whether they view aretaic concepts as eliminating the need for deontic ones, or whether they allow the latter some employment. But even where deontic concepts are used, the justification of those judgements in which they occur, is made in terms of aretaic judgements. Thus the judgement "Lying is wrong" finds its justification in terms of an aretaic judgement to the effect that lying is wrong because it is dishonest and dishonesty is a vice. My own preference however, is to place deontic concepts in the line for the unemployed.

Any virtue theory needs to consider why certain qualities of character are virtues while others are vices. One thing that distinguishes virtue ethics from any version of utilitarianism, whether rule, act, or character utilitarianism, is that the goodness of certain qualities of character is supported in terms that are non-consequentialist. In its most famous version, Aristotelian eudaimonism, we have a virtue ethic which does not regard the well-being of an agent as a consequence

produced by the agent's virtues. Rather the agent's well-being is viewed as constituted, at least in part, by possession of the virtues. Whether one can successfully pull off such an argument is a significant issue, but at least it is clearly different in character than any consequentialist argument.

Given that there can be various types of virtue ethics which are non-deontological and non-utilitarian, we can likewise expect variety in the way virtue ethics influences the conduct of moral education. In the concluding section to their book, the editors are chiefly concerned to show how virtue ethics offers a more promising perspective on the ethical formation of the young than does its deontological and utilitarian rivals. While all virtue ethics regard aretaic concepts as basic, most, but not all, regard virtue ethics as an agent ethics. That is, the standard of acting well is the virtuous agent not universalized maxims or maximized utilities. Thus moral education accords primacy to the development of certain traits of character rather than seeking conformity to certain rules or principles. One advantage of this approach over its rivals is that as an aretaic agent ethics it does not leave a gap between an agent's reasons and his or her motives. After all, one could be an excellent reasoner by being in accord with certain rules or principles and yet fail to act accordingly. Without the relevant dispositions not much has been gained. Yet in some versions of virtue ethics, since the virtuous agent recognizes certain actions as having virtue related characteristics and acts because of these characteristics, this suggests that moral education is not only concerned with the fostering of motivational capacities but also with developing an agent's ability to make correct appraisals about actions. This version of virtue ethics, called by the editors an agent focussed virtue ethics, differs from an agent based virtue ethics in that appraisals of actions are as basic as are the motives of the agent. Accordingly, not only does a student need to learn to be moved by the sort of considerations that move a virtuous agent, but he or she also needs to learn how to appraise actions in terms of virtue related characteristics.

Although Carr and Steutel view virtue ethics as providing the best basis for moral education they do acknowledge certain difficulties in this approach. For example, is a moral education which is based on a eudaimonistic virtue ethic compatible with public schooling in a liberal polity? After all, such a polity does not seek to foster one particular conception of human well-being at the expense of rival conceptions. In addition to the editors own comments on this issue, at least two of the contributions to the volume consider allied matters. Eamonn Callan for example, raises a question about whether dispositions such as tolerance, moderation, and open-mindedness, all of which count as virtues in a liberal polity, are indeed

genuine virtues. For Kenneth Strike however, the issue is not whether liberal virtues are indeed the genuine article, but whether the goods, virtues, and standards which are internal to certain intellectual practices can be imparted as part of a worthwhile life while at the same time adhering to a liberal polity's respect for a diversity of traditions even when some of these traditions are hostile to the goods, virtues, and standards of the practices being taught.

The difficulty of fostering the virtues within a liberal polity is not the only problem connected with a virtue based moral education. There are other long standing issues such as the unity of the virtues, the possibility of akrasia, the significance of phronesis, and the all-important though often misunderstood role of habituation within moral education. Each of these topics receives separate treatment in this well-ordered volume. While it is the unfortunate fate of many volumes of collected essays to have items which have little thematic connection with one another, this particular collection has (dare I say it?) the virtue of coherence made visible by the helpful introductory and concluding essays. The editors note that "books and papers attempting virtue theoretical analyses of moral education as such are, whilst by no means unknown, surprisingly few and far between." (p. 242) Let us hope that the current volume will serve as an example of what can and should be done.

Notes

1. London and New York: Routledge, 1999.