After Kohlberg: Some Implications of an Ethics of Virtue for the Theory of Moral Education and Development

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ABSTRACT: It is beyond serious dispute that post-war reflection upon and research into moral education and development has been well nigh dominated by an extensive and ambitious research programme influenced and initiated by the modern cognitive developmental theorist Lawrence Kohlberg – a programme which can also be seen, moreover, as standing in a tradition of philosophical reflection about the nature of moral life going back to such significant enlightenment thinkers as Kant and Rousseau. It will also be familiar, however, that a powerful critique of this essentially liberal conception of the nature of moral life and values has lately gathered momentum under the influence of contemporary post-analytical and communitarian social and moral theorists variously under the spell of Aristotle. In the first place, then, this paper argues that a basically Kohlbergian approach to thinking about moral education is difficult – if not impossible – to sustain in the face of this neo-Aristotelian critique; secondly, however, it attempts to explore the possibilities of an alternative virtue-theoretical basis for understanding the nature of moral life and education.

KEY WORDS: Aristotle, Kohlberg, cognitive development, virtue theory, rival traditions, *phronesis*, foundationalism, constructivism.

1. THE DEVELOPMENT ORTHODOXY

Since Rousseau first suggested that childhood has its own ways of seeing, thinking and feeling[1] it has appeared plausible to take a developmental view of the growth of human psychological capacities and qualities of character. Moreover, with the emergence in modern times of empirical approaches to the study of human behaviour it was inevitable that serious attempts would eventually be made to place enquiry into human development – including moral development – on a proper scientific basis. I dare say that there would also be little dispute nowadays that over all modern attempts to understand moral development in social scientific terms towers the impressive figure of Lawrence Kohlberg who, in the course of a long and distinguished career, sought to trace what he held to be the invariant course of human moral understanding via an ambitious programme of essentially empirically based and focused research.[2] Indeed, the pioneering investigations of Kohlberg have subsequently bequeathed to the world of social scientific enquiry a research programme of such gargantuan proportions that it may still nowadays be safely regarded as the dominant paradigm of research into questions of moral education and development in many leading contemporary academic centres for such enquiry.[3]

Despite this, Kohlberg's theory is by no means uncontroversial in a variety of different respects to which a host of critics have not ceased to draw attention. Aside from the various criticisms which may be mounted against the research

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methodology of Kohlberg and his students, for example, large questions also need to be asked about the philosophical or conceptual assumptions underlying his account of the nature of moral life. For a start, to the extent that Kohlberg's theory, like that of his principal mentor Piaget,[4] is focused well nigh exclusively on the cognitive aspects of individual moral psychology, it has struck many critics as dangerously one-sided or incomplete. To be sure, this did not go unnoticed by Kohlberg himself who tried, in his later work, to compensate for his earlier emphasis on individual cognitive processing with a complementary stress on the social aspects of moral growth – via the idea of a 'community of justice.' However, it remains far from clear whether these two rather different sides of his moral thought are reconciled or reconcilable in his account in any very satisfactory way.[5]

But perhaps yet more serious difficulties for Kohlberg's account are raised by his neglect of the affective and motivational dimensions of moral life and of much in the way of a satisfactory story about how cognitive processes informed by rational principles might come to exercise a significant impact upon the actual conduct of individual agents; indeed, the observations of empirical researchers into moral development to the effect that the actual moral conduct of children is not infrequently at odds with what might have been predicted of them on the basis of Kohlbergian assessments of their level of cognitive moral development are by now fairly familiar.[6] Moreover, it would seem that two main lines of contemporary Kolbergian criticism are of especial relevance here. The more recent of these, developed – if not altogether helpfully – in the context of a feminist critique of Kohlberg's account, argues that whilst it goes some way towards explaining the development of an agent's principled appreciation of individual rights and interpersonal obligations, it seriously neglects and underestimates the moral provenance and significance of more affectively grounded qualities of care and concern for others.[7] However, a rather earlier critical perspective, clearly discernible in the prolific output on moral education of the influential British educational philosopher R.S. Peters, focused more on Kohlberg's apparent neglect of the moral significance of the acquisition of certain behavioural dispositions or qualities of character; moreover, Peters predictably – though not unreservedly – explicitly invoked the name and authority of Aristotle in just this connection.[8]

Now it might be suggested – and this idea would appear to be at least implicit in what some of these critics of Kohlberg (and their followers) actually say in their writings – that if cognitive development theory is merely deficient in certain readily identifiable respects, all we require is that the relevant theoretical shortcomings should be made good via appropriate amendments: that, in short, we might simply add to Kohlberg's theory what it leaves out by way of reference to the significance for moral life of emotions or qualities of character. It is one main contention of this paper, however, that because Kohlberg's theory is deeply at odds philosophically with the sorts of considerations upon which its critics have based their main objections, there can be no coherent or successful attempt to repair or modify it along these lines. For example, there are clearly demonstrable reasons why Kohlberg's basically enlightenment conception of moral agency as rooted in a certain form of rational prescriptivity – reasons which

reach back beyond Piaget to Kant and Rousseau – can hardly avoid sidelining the affective dimensions of human experience, for good or ill, as a legitimate source of potential moral response.

Matters are a good deal worse, however, when we turn to the other possible proposal whereby we might try to repair Kohlberg's account; for any attempt to reconcile his neo-Kantian story about the provenance of moral principles with some sort of Aristotelian account of moral life as focused on the acquisition of dispositionally construed qualities of character cannot but be a complete philosophical non-starter. But the problem here is not, as has sometimes been suggested,[9] that the sort of rational constructivism characteristic of Kantian and other deontological perspectives focuses on principles to the neglect of dispositions, whereas Aristotelians emphasize dispositions at the expense of principles; indeed, both these ethical perspectives are well aware of and have plenty to say concerning the importance of principles *and* dispositions – otherwise they would hardly be worth taking at all seriously as accounts of human moral life. It is more that the two positions take principles to be related to dispositions in markedly different – indeed fundamentally opposed – ways.

Thus, whereas universalizable moral principles are for Kantians the sole source and foundation of ethically significant human motives and inclinations,[10] rational principles assume for Aristotelians a somewhat more modest role in moral life; indeed, their ethical significance consists primarily in the part they play with regard to the regulation of attitudes and inclinations which are accorded considerable moral status in advance of such regulation. Briefly, one might therefore say that whereas for Kantians rational principles are essentially *constitutive* of moral life – they determine precisely what is or is not to count as ethically relevant practical content – for Aristotelians, moral principles are better regarded as *regulatory* of modes of conduct and association which have morally significant social and emotional as well as cognitive features.

In other words, one could also say that for the Aristotelian moral life is rooted more in principled dispositions than in dispositions to be principled and, in its emphasis on the ethical primacy of those qualities of character ordinarily termed virtues,[11] an Aristotelian ethics can only stand in the starkest opposition and contrast to the sort of neo-Kantian perspective which informs a theory such as Kohlberg's. However, the very existence of such a radically alternative ethical perspective cannot but have profound implications for any serious reflection upon the nature of moral development and education – not the least of these being that Kohlberg's theory cannot honestly be sold to educationalists, as I suspect it has formerly been sold, as a largely philosophically neutral and empirically validated account of moral life and the invariant course of moral cognitive growth. Thus, whether or not Kohlberg's theory is correct, it is clearly philosophically controversial, it has probably more than one serious conceptual rival and it would anyway appear to be based on a somewhat counter-intuitive account of the logical contours and practical substance of human moral life.

Moreover, faced with the difficulty of conceptually accommodating precisely those affective and motivational ingredients of moral life which are now widely

held to have been largely neglected or sidelined by Kohlberg's account, it would appear that there is much to be said on behalf of a serious re-examination of an Aristotelian ethics of virtue. It is of course fairly common knowledge that Kohlberg was himself inclined to reject what he referred to rather derisively as the 'bag of virtues' approach to moral development,[12] presumably because he regarded character traits as too indeterminate, relative or protean to underpin any systematic account of the objective basis of moral judgement. Bearing in mind the enormous diversity of evidently serious but yet conflicting moral views in contemporary circumstances of cultural pluralism, Kohlberg would appear to have supposed moral objectivity to be grounded only in the form rather than the substance of moral judgement.

But in so supposing Kohlberg would appear to have at once underrated the extent to which principled reflection is indeed implicated in the expression of particular virtues – at least on anything resembling the classic Aristotelian account – and also to have overrated the extent to which universal principles are needed for rational moral agency, either to secure general objectivity or for particular deliberative purposes. To be more precise, it is arguably not philosophically necessary – and may, indeed, be quite wrongheaded – to try to locate the objectivity of moral judgement or conduct, after the fashion of deontologists, in the idea of universal rules; rather, one might seek, in the manner of the virtue theorist, to ground it in the development and exercise of certain familiar traits of mind and character discernibly conducive to the achievement of a range of positive goals of human life, conduct and association. In short, rather than evaluating moral judgements and responses in terms of their conformity or otherwise to certain rational canons of universal prescriptivity, one might seek to assess them by reference to their success in promoting the aims and purposes of a range of dispositions – the virtues – construed as constitutive of some ethically defensible conception of human well-being or flourishing.

2. RIVAL TRADITIONS OF VIRTUE

Thus, far from being fatal to any virtue-centred account of moral life and education, it is more than likely that Kohlberg's criticisms are based merely on a misconstrual of traditional conceptions of virtue – especially of the role assigned to reason and deliberation on such conceptions. However, there are rather more serious objections to a virtue-based theory of moral development and education. For, it will be said, how could those dispositions regarded by Aristotelians as virtues – even if they are construed as reflective or principled – be possibly viewed as providing an objective basis for morality when, even according to Aristotle,[13] what is required to act virtuously varies from one occasion to another and societies differ markedly in their conceptions of morally significant or beneficial individual and interpersonal conduct.

Indeed, it may appear something of an irony that what could well be considered a decisive objection along these lines has lately been advanced by perhaps

the foremost contemporary proponent of an ethics of virtue. In an important paper on moral education, Alasdair MacIntyre[14] has argued consonant with his well known 'rival conceptions' view of the character of moral understanding that, since any meaningful education in morality must amount to an initiation into a repertoire of virtues enshrining some substantial evaluative perspective on the good life, it is idle to imagine that we might identify any basic or impartial conception of the processes of moral education reflecting what he refers to as 'a shared public morality of commonplace usage.' Essentially, this point is taken to follow from his familiar arguments elsewhere[15] that in the domain of morality there cannot ever be what another distinguished contemporary philosopher has called 'a view from nowhere'[16] and that therefore acquiring a moral perspective is more a matter of cultural inheritance than autonomous rational choice. But, in that case, the aims and procedures of moral education – especially in the common schools of a culturally pluralist society – cannot be other than inherently controversial and problematic. However, although MacIntyre's argument may well be read as spelling the doom of any attempt to ground moral education in an ethics of virtue, I think that such a potentially sceptical or pessimistic conclusion is premature and that it is crucial to clarify and separate a number of different issues and concerns which seem to be run together here to no good purpose.

To begin with, it would appear that there is generally a fair amount of play in MacIntyre's account of rival traditions between the idea that competing accounts may be offered of the grammar of moral life – that there are, in short, different theories of ethics – and the idea, wholly embraced by virtue theorists, that there are competing moral perspectives in somewhat more straightforward normative terms. However, in the light of this distinction it may well seem perverse to ground an argument for the inherent controversiality of any virtue-centred conception of moral education in the recognition that there are rival ethical theories of the kind to which we have already adverted in contrasting a Kantian with an Aristotelian perspective. But this is precisely what MacIntyre appears to do; he treats a Humean morality of natural sentiment, for example, as a rival conception of *virtue* likely to be promoted in some contexts in the name of moral education.

This is liable, however, to engender confusion; for on any reputable virtue-centred account, a Humean view is not a rival conception of virtue – since it is not, in the required sense, a conception of *virtue* at all. Indeed, it is at best a category mistake and at worst courts paradox to argue on the basis of Aristotelian anti-foundationalist assumptions which precisely license rival moral traditions, that even those ethical theories which reject these assumptions, must also count, in much the same sense, as alternative conceptions of virtue. For surely, the main point to be taken from endorsing a generally Aristotelian account of the nature of moral life and development is that to promote Kohlbergian cognitive problem-solving skills in the name of moral education, for example, is not to teach an alternative set of moral virtues, but rather – by not teaching anything which might count as genuine virtues at all – to proceed according to an inherently *mistaken* conception of moral education.

A rather different, albeit related, category mistake – one which is by no means peculiar to MacIntyre – is the failure to distinguish sufficiently a moral perspective construed in virtue-theoretical terms as a system of dispositions from a moral perspective more epistemologically conceived as an ideology or system of beliefs. It is quite central to the virtue-theoretical point of view, however, that to whatever extent the virtues of individuals are related to their beliefs, they are not at all the same thing. Indeed, one can readily admire a person for his or her virtues without in the least sharing their beliefs; for example, it is by no mean inconsistent for someone to deplore the orthodox Christian view of homosexuality yet applaud the sympathy and compassion (even if considered misplaced) discernible in the responses of individual Christians to those they nevertheless sincerely believe to be in error. Conversely, however, the moral behaviour of those who profess to believe the same as I do – Christian, Communist or whatever – may often enough conduce only to my acute embarrassment; it is no impediment to regarding the conduct of another person as weak, cruel or dishonest that, epistemically speaking, they purport to belong to the same moral community as I do.

But, is not the point here that, since there is clearly something more in the way of an internal than an external connection between a person's beliefs and his or her behaviour, it cannot even be possible to identify their virtues independently of their moral-epistemological perspective, and hence – since such perspectives may well be incommensurable between different human communities – what counts as a virtue can only be a matter of extreme cultural relativity? This point, however, quite blatantly begs the question. For, from the observation that moral virtues are internally related to moral beliefs, one should assume no foregone conclusions about the order of logical dependence between them. It is true that many who endorse the idea of rival traditions take virtues to be relative to such traditions – but that is merely because they assume in advance of honest philosophical argument that moral perspectives are at heart no more than cultural conventions or social codes. But this is precisely what at least some virtue theorists deny in insisting that underlying all socially constructed systems of moral belief there is a common human concern with the development of morally significant behavioural dispositions and responses which in a real sense cut across local differences of social code and creed. In short, it is possible to accept the point that there is considerable conceptual interdependence between moral beliefs and dispositions – that, indeed, there may be no "view from nowhere" – without assuming that the order of logical derivation is from the first to the second rather than vice versa.

But how can one simultaneously claim that human virtues are essentially context bound to particular systems of moral belief and yet insist that they are moral responses which in a real sense cut across differences of context; isn't the idea that there is no view from nowhere more or less tantamount to the notion that there are no universal moral principles or rules which are applicable to all human circumstances? Although this ostensible contradiction is more apparent than real, it is a common enough source of confusion to merit further clarification. In

the first place, of course, it should be recognised that although the exercise of a virtue may well involve the application of a principle or rule, it is nevertheless not reducible to such application and the relationship of virtues to rules is, as we shall shortly see, quite complex. A crude analogy, so far as it goes, might help here.[17] For whilst we understand in general what it is to drive well, and driving well is to a considerable extent describable in terms of the observance of rules, it does not in the least follow that good driving is always a matter of following the same rules; we know, for example, that whereas in some countries driving well is keeping to the the left hand side of the road and giving way at roundabouts to the right, in other countries one should drive on the right and give way to the left. Thus, though good driving involves the observance of different – even contradictory – rules in different contexts, and there is no such thing in conventional circumstances as good driving which is not the observance of *some* rules or conventions or other, what we understand by good driving is *neither* reducible to any of these particular rules *nor* identifiable with any which are universally applicable.

The point of this no doubt loose analogy is that being courageous, temperate, just or virtuous in any other respect, is better construed on the model of being a good driver than on that of obeying a particular highway code. The two things may coincide – but they need not; indeed, my recognising that there is a need for courage or self-control in certain circumstances may well be, as in the case of my recognition of a need for better driving, an occasion for jettisoning an old rule and the development of a new one more appropriate to present circumstances. But, though this recognition may issue in the formulation of different principles in different circumstances it is important to see that this social or cultural relativism does not imply any moral relativism. The moral relativist makes the mistake of assuming that because virtues are liable to divergent normative expression in terms of different social conventions, what is actually *meant* by courage or temperance must vary from one cultural context to another. The virtue-theorist, on the other hand, is able to recognise that extremely divergent, event apparently contradictory, responses to recognisable moral problems in different contexts may all yet count as instances or expressions of courage because he avoids the error of identifying the virtue with the conventions through which the virtue is expressed – though, of course, he also avoids the equal and opposite error of supposing that there can be any such thing as a moral virtue which is free of any form of cultural expression or instantiation whatsoever. Indeed, the virtue-theoretical position has also the philosophical edge of explaining here what the relativist is constitutionally unable to explain – namely, the fact that we can and do rightly condemn the practices and institutions of many past and present day societies as vicious, unjust, cruel or corrupt; but this can only be to the extent that the language of moral virtue has a certain logical primacy over that of social principles, rules and conventions, however morally significant these may be. (It is tantamount to taking leave of our moral senses ot suppose that because Nazis embrace all kinds of cruelty and injustice they must have an alternative morality; on the contrary, it is because they are patently cruel and unjust that we cannot dignify what they believe and do with the title of morality.)

But what of the problem of moral education? It might still be suggested that if it is not possible for specific acts of courage, justice, benevolence and the like to be exhibited in ways which are innocent of some social or cultural form or expression or other, this cannot but mean that I can teach only the moral virtues implying the evaluative priorities of a given cultural context – so that moral education must, when all is said and done, reduce to a kind of social conditioning or indoctrination. Whilst we shall be engaging rather more fully with this issue in the final section of this paper, it should be clear from what has already been said that this is not at all a plausible suggestion – no more reasonable really than supposing that because someone has had to learn to drive according to British highway conventions he or she is henceforth and forever psychologically hindered from appreciating foreign highway conventions or from being able to drive elsewhere. But we may return to this question after a brief consideration of the basic conceptual grammar of the idea of a moral virtue at source in the work of Aristotle.

3. THE GRAMMAR OF VIRTUE

Such cognitive development theorists as Piaget and Kohlberg were certainly correct in recognising that the principal problem for the idea of moral education is that of making some sense of the ideas of moral reason and knowledge (as opposed to, say, moral behaviour training) even if – from a virtue theoretical perspective – they gave distorted accounts of the nature of that reason and knowledge. Without doubt, the main alternative to the basic enlightenment conceptions of these matters of the cognitivists is a virtue-theoretical one, and the first best place to seek such an account is in the ethical works of Aristotle. Briefly, Aristotle's account of the nature of moral reason is given in his concept of *phronesis* or practical wisdom, and his account of moral knowledge is contained in the idea of virtue as a dispositional state of character construed, in turn, as a function of the application of *phronesis* to practical experience – though in what he says about this Aristotle seems inclined to a somewhat suspect story about the way in which practical wisdom functions in the general psychological economy of individual moral agents. We may now consider these matters in turn.

In a well-known passage of the *Nichomachean Ethics*,[18] Aristotle maintains that in the sphere of practical reasoning we deliberate about means rather than ends – proceeding to shed some further light on this otherwise rather opaque observation by adding that just as physician deliberates only about how he should heal, not whether he should heal, so a moral agent ought not to debate about whether, but only how, to be courageous or just. To whatever extent some may have construed this as expressing an essentially conservative denial that we can ever coherently question the received evaluative goals and aspirations of our moral community, however, I do not believe that this is Aristotle's point here; in fact, I suspect that this point is a rather more basic anti-foundationalist one about the logical relationship of moral reasoning to ethical principles and values – that moral deliberation must operate on the inside, as it were, of a system of values

and not according to some "view from nowhere." Thus, even on those occasions when moral deliberation is put to the purpose of re-evaluating the received goals of a given moral community such reasoning will be largely a matter of what another recent writer[19] has called "reasoning in transitions" – reasoning developed either by processes of self-criticism within a given tradition or from the perspective of an alternative set of values hailing from another tradition (but certainly not neutrally arrived at independently of any tradition).

Effectively, the virtue-theoretical rejection of ethical foundationalism amounts to the denial that one might appropriately suppose human moral life to be rationally grounded in or reconstructable on the basis of a set of self evident or otherwise incontrovertable ethical principles conceivable in abstraction from any actual social-historical conditions or circumstances of human existence. The ship of human moral life is already afloat and the moral reforms needed for its repair can be carried out only at sea. In reflecting on the nature of moral life, then, the place to begin is with the idea of a moral tradition construed as a complex system of ideals, principles and values embedded in a living form of human social life. But, although it is true that these values are liable to be expressed in terms of different customs and conventions or accorded rather different priority at different times and in different places, it is also the case that in anything worth regarding as a human morality, a common commitment to certain enduring human values – truth, justice, social co-operation and so on – will be discernable across the differences. It is the dispositions to actual practical conduct which enshrine or instantiate these basic values which are known in human cultures as virtues – and their opposites as vices.

It is crucial to be clear, however, that although virtue theory does regard the virtues as in an important sense basic to moral life they are not conceived to be so in the manner of the rationally self-justifying universal rules beloved of ethical foundationalists. First, as we have already seen, though the exercise of a virtue may involve rule-following there is much more to a virtue than a rule. Secondly, unlike Kantian principles, virtues are not self justifying: they have value in human affairs to the extent that they are practically conducive to the promotion of certain objectively discernable states and conditions of human prosperity or flourishing. But thirdly, although at the level of such basic human values as honesty and justice this connection with human wellbeing may be expected to be of an internal or conceptual rather than a contingent kind – indeed, it is hard to conceive the idea of a *moral* community in which lying and cheating might be regarded as virtues in any readily intelligible or consistent sense – it is difficult to regard the dispositions which enshrine such values as universally applicable across the moral board. Thus, although the connection between upholding the truth and effective individual and social functioning is of such a strength that we can hardly do other than acknowledge lying to be a general moral shortcoming, there are nevertheless readily conceivable circumstances in which a certain degree of dissembling is morally excusable or defensible and some – where not so doing might bring about enormous unnecessary suffering to others – in which insisting on telling the truth would be tantamount to moral irresponsibility.

It is thus probably better to think of the basic values enshrined in the virtues as criterial rather than foundational with respect to the operations of moral deliberation. They are not watertight or binding principles which determine for us exactly what we should do in any morally problematic sitution, but considerations and claims which must weigh heavily with us in trying to arrive at the particular decision which is morally appropriate to the actual circumstances we find ourselves in – and this is why, of course, Aristotle's idea of *phronesis* or practical wisdom must be understood as a form of *judgement* rather than as some sort of algorithm for the mathematical deduction of necessary conclusions from moral axioms. However, it is also important to see that this degree of slack on a virtue – theoretical account between the evaluative premises and the practical conclusions of a moral argument – especially in circumstances of dire dilemma in which competing values may appear to have equally weighty claims on our attention – does not imply some merely external or contingent relationship between them. Although, then, virtue theory is a form of teleological ethics which links virtue or moral correctness to ideas of *eudaemonia* or flourishing – it is not a form of consequentialism, and only that conduct qualifies as virtuous which is at least intentionally consistent with the most basic moral values and principles of truth and justice. Hence, virtue theory is also able to resist the kind of bizarre ethical laundering characteristic of utilitarianism whereby any type of human act – murder, adultery, theft – may be considered ethically defensible if it maximises human happiness; for the virtue theorist the general ethical status of such actions is such that they must be regarded as absolutely wrong even if there are circumstances in which some of them cannot be practically avoided to avert yet worse evils. Virtue theory, then, readily embraces the idea of absolute moral values (for Aristotle, adultery is *always* wrong) but these are not derived from any such notion as that of rationally self justifying universal imperatives – for it is illusory to suppose that there might be such things.

But although *phronesis* or practical wisdom must needs function within some system or other of belief and value enshrined in the developing moral tradition of a living human community – the personal acquisition of moral knowledge is not on a virtue-theoretical account merely a matter of acquaintance with any such tradition, but also of coming to be able to apply practical wisdom reflectively to one's own personal experience in the interests of effective moral agency. However, the kind of experience required for the meaningful application of *phronesis* is not a matter of detached empirical observation but rather that required for active participation in the personal and interpersonal contexts of human *practical* life; as Aristotle himself puts it,[20] the point of practical moral deliberation is not to acquire mere theoretical knowledge of the good but to help us *become* good. And, to the extent that this is so, it follows that it is the primary purpose of practical wisdom not to assist us to understand or explain how the world is in theoretical terms but to help us achieve a measure of order and discipline in our personal and interpersonal conduct and affairs; moral knowledge is therefore more a matter of the acquisition of practical dispositions than the mastery of propositions.

Thus, for Aristotle, the individual aquisition of moral knowledge is tantamount to mastery of the virtues which are effectively principled *dispositions*; for genuine moral knowledge an agent requires *both* principles *and* experience – to have learned to exercise and express values in the rough and tumble of human practical affairs. Indeed, it can hardly be overstated here that although *phronesis* functions to assist an agent's understanding of what to do for the best in morally problematic circumstances it is not in itself sufficient for moral knowledge until reinforced or underpinned by this or that disposition to pursue the good. In short, though there is indeed such a thing as moral knowledge, it is not to be conceived on the model of justified true belief, since acquiring knowledge in the sphere of morality amounts to mastering the virtues, virtues enshrine values, and there is more to a value than entertaining the proposition "x is good" or "A is here a better course of action than B" A general failure to grasp this basic Aristotelian insight has, I suspect, bedevilled much moral theory and resulted, from the time of Plato onwards, in countless ill-starred controversies concerning the nature of the relationship of reasons to action in moral motivation.[21]

But a large question remains about how our socially conditioned and emotionally coloured experience of practical life stands to be ordered or informed by the principles and precepts of *phronesis* in the interests of effective moral agency. Regarding this, however, I shall observe only briefly that although much scorn has been poured by philosophers on Aristotle's own response to this question – that we should seek to order our affairs in accordance with the so-called *golden mean*[22] – I believe that a plausible version of this thesis, actually more consistent with the overall spirit of Aristotle's philosophy than the one he in fact gives, is defensible. Indeed, arguably the main difficulty about Aristotle's own account of the workings of the mean is that it sits rather oddly with his general view of moral success and failure as functions of various sorts of interplay between reason, feeling and circumstance – according to which virtue is effectively the right ordering of natural impulses and sentiments in a given practical situation and vice is the wrong ordering of them. Aristotle's own instance of courage as the mean between two vices of excess and defect of fear, for example, seems not especially faithful to this principle for – aside from a familiar objection[23] that recklessness seems not an obvious opposite of courage – how might a mere absence of fear of danger be supposed to impel someone towards rather than away from it?

However, it may help mend matters to recall that moral knowledge, for Aristotle, is generally a matter of complex interplay between reason and *practical* experience – which therefore requires that a moral agent should learn how to apply the deliverences of *phronesis* in the course of actual engagement in practical human affairs. This is precisely the point of Aristotle's famous analogy between learning to be good and aquiring a skill – that we learn to be honest, courages or just by honest, courageous and just *acts*, much as a musician might improve his art by regular practice upon his instrument.[24] But, from this point of view, it seems clear that Aristotle regards moral discipline as just as much concerned with the cultivation of social and altruistic inclinations – a love, as it were, of the good – as it is with the control of selfish or anti-social

ones, and hence deviations from the mean might be construed as practical failures in either of these respects. No matter how implausible it may be to regard courage as a virtue which is opposed to two vices of excessive and insufficient fear, then, it is not at all difficult to see how someone might fall short morally in circumstances requiring some prudent resolution – either through too much fear or irresolution or due to an excess of enthusiasm or zeal which forsakes all reasonable caution. I believe, moreover, that such a revised account of the operations of the mean can be employed to clarify much of what Aristotle has to say about incontinence in the seventh book of the *Nichomachean Ethics* with enormous implications for the development of a rich philosophical psychology of moral education.[25]

4. REVISION AND DESCRIPTION IN MORAL THEORY AND EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

As we have previously noted, there can be little doubt that, despite Kohberg's well nigh promiscuous theoretical ecclecticism, the theories of moral development of contemporary cognitive psychologists are essentially a legacy of the enlightenment – specifically of the ethical views of Kant. In what should now be considered a modern philosophical classic[26] Peter Strawson drew a thought-provoking distinction – mainly in relation to their natural philosophies – between revisionary metaphysicians such as Berkeley, Leibniz and Spinoza and descriptive metaphysicians such as Aristotle and Kant. However, although we should not place too much weight on this rough and ready taxonomy, it is certainly arguable that the practical philosophies of Aristotle and Kant are not descriptive in anything like the same sense or to the same extent. Effectively, Kant's uncompromising deontological ethics of duty is the product of an essentially Rousseauesque romantic moral rationalism which exalts the claims of reason over tradition, and his own philosophy of experience which claims, *pace* Hume, that since the empirically discernable inclinations of inner experience belong to the world of causally conditioned phenomena, they are hardly relevant to the psychological economy of voluntary moral agency.

Of course, the Rousseau-Kant view of morality as universal law no longer exercises quite the same appeal in contemporary circumstances of social and cultural pluralism and, indeed, the influence of Kant largely survives in the largely degenerate forms of a prescriptivist ethics of consistent personal commitment on the one hand and a contractarian ethics of overlapping consensus on the other. Moreover, it would appear to have been insufficiently noticed by philosophers of moral education that the attempt to conjoin these inherently inconsistent views of the basis of moral judgement is a familiar feature of much contemporary official policy documentation concerning moral education (as exhibited, for example in a common distinction between core and personal values) as well as much recent social scientific enquiry in the field. Kohlberg's work is no exception to this general trend and his attempt to reconcile the essentially contractarian idea of a community of justice with the liberal individualist notion of morality as consistent

autonomous choice cannot, I believe, be captured in terms of a single coherent account of the operations of practical deliberation.[27]

Clearly, however, the feature which most conspicuously links the developmental theory of Kohlberg to the enlightenment ethical views of Rousseau and Kant is its essentially disinherited, foundationalist and constructivist character which aspires to rewrite the moral law in the hearts of men precisely according to a view from nowhere; hence, young people are to acquire moral values largely via their disinterested contemplation of artificially constructed moral dilemmas avoiding, as far as possible, any kind of direct exposure to or initiation into received traditions of human moral life. I believe, however, that if we examine more critically the assumptions lying behind this sort of constructivist epistemology and pedagogy we are quickly able to recognise that it implies a rather bizarre view of both moral life and moral education.

In fact, there would appear to be two principal motives in contemporary curriculum theory for espousing a constructivist pedagogy – only one of which, I think, is ultimately defensible. The more respectable first reason is discernable, for example, in Dewey's pragmatist critique of traditional "reception" conceptions of the educational aquisition of knowledge. On this view, far too much traditional school learning has proceeded on the Gradgrindian assumption that acquiring knowledge and understanding amounts to little more than the passive reception of so many inert facts. Here, constructivism amounts effectively to encouraging learners to see that in so far as understanding involves theory-construction, hypothesis testing, problem-solving, insight and imagination it is so much more than merely accumulating information. The second more suspect reason is often discernable in connection with theorising about instruction in more value-laden areas of the curriculum – such as history, religious knowledge and moral education – but it has often derived inspiration in modern times from certain highly sceptical and anti-realist post-empiricist and post-modern philosophies of science.[28] On this view it is not just that there is more than one way to interpret or conceptualise facts or information construed as the basic data on which theories or hypotheses go to work – for there are, it is alleged, no such theory or value-free observations upon which neutral or unbiased facts or information might be based.

I think that there can be next to no doubt that modern ethical constructivism, in harking back via Kant to Rousseau's profound distrust of the received moral "wisdom" of tradition, is effectively informed by the second rather than the first of these contentions. Indeed, the present day impact of fairly radical libertarian views of a markedly Rousseauesque character is perhaps most readily discernible in the moral educational practice of certain progressive educationalists – one of the best known of whom is undoubtedly the late British teacher A.S Neill.[29] Influenced more directly by psychoanalytic theory than enlightenment philosophy Neill nevertheless came remarkably close to Rousseau in holding – and putting into practice – the idea that young people should as far as and for as long as possible be shielded from the largely pernicious and corrupt influences of conventional social opinion for the purpose of developing their own natural and

untainted ethics of social cooperation grounded in a kind of contractual negotiation of individual interests; in short, Neill attempted to apply to moral educational practice the extreme political liberal idea that restricting the freedom of individuals is only justified in the event that their actions might pose a real threat to the freedom of others.

But, of course, one also finds very much the same sort of liberal cocktail of prescriptivist and contractarian constructivism in Kohlberg as one does, despite their somewhat different influences, in Neill – namely, the same ideal of autonomous practical decision-making in the context of a proper recognition of one's social responsibilities to others. Not that there is anything inherently wrong with these general aims as such; it is rather the conceptions of how they are to be achieved which seem suspect. For clearly liberal constructivism is much infected, via Rousseau, with a kind of Cartesian scepticism about the state of any inherited moral knowledge and understanding which urges that we should start again and from scratch the project of constructing a sound rational basis for our ethical life. Thus, from A.S Neill comes the bizarre idea that children should be told nothing at all about what is right or wrong but simply be left to work it out for themselves (since human nature is inherently good) and from Kohlberg the idea that moral education might be centred upon the development of certain cognitive skills apt for the principled resolution of a range of putative moral dilemmas conceived as far as possible in abstraction from any particular ethical tradition or perspective. If this tradition of philosophical thought about morality and moral education, over which Kant looms as a figure of enormous influence, is not yet revisionist in the sense of Berkeley's epistemology, then it is nevertheless not descriptive in the manner of Aristotle's ethics; moreover, with regard especially to its almost exclusive moral emphasis on cognitive principles and its rational foundationalism, it would at least appear to enshrine revisionist elements.

But surely such views of moral education ought to strike the philosophically unprejudiced eye as really rather incredible? To begin with, of course, Kohlberg's dilemmas are not ethically topic-neutral and any rational responses to them cannot but reflect the views of this or that moral tradition – that private property is the just desert of free enterprise and effort, that the preservation of human life is normally an overriding moral consideration, that the sexes are to be regarded as having equal status as persons and so on. Secondly, however, Kohlberg and Neill's largely pragmatist construals of moral capacities as cognitive or other skills apt for the solution of problems of interpersonal relationship or conflict of interests – rather than, say, the development of qualities of character which might assist a person to cope with essentially *insoluble* human problems – might well appear to be an at least limited if not badly distorted conceptualization of our ordinary pre-theoretical notions of moral life. But, thirdly, the romantic rationalist view – also expressed in their various ways by both theorists – that young people ought to be led to such a view of moral life as far as possible in independence of the formal instruction which might prejudice their hearts, minds and conduct in one way or another, may well appear utterly far-fetched.

From this point of view, indeed, it is hard not to notice the extent to which the romantic rationalist or enlightenment view of moral life and education is seriously at odds with our common view of what would constitute education in any other area of human enquiry or endeavour. Thus, we should not ordinarily suppose that we might teach someone science without initiating them into the received theories and hypotheses of existing scientific knowledge, or a craft like painting or woodwork without introducing them to the conventions, skills and techniques which are the acknowledged state of the art in the relevant fields. Why, then, should we seek to deny the traditional presumption of educationalists that much the same is true of moral education? On this view, moral education is essentially a matter of initiating young people into the "best moral picture"[30] available in a given social and cultural context, which primarily means equipping them as far as possible with those rational dispositions – the virtues – practically conducive to the achievement of whatever goals that picture might celebrate. There are, however, two main objections to this conventional view which – since they both relate to the bogy of indoctrination – are often unhelpfully run together.

The first of these objections is, as already noted, based on the considerations which underpin the second account of constructivism. According to this perspective, since there is no such thing as objective moral knowledge or truth, any purported initiation into the virtues can amount to hardly more than a kind of behavioural conditioning into some set of socially approved norms. But if this view is correct then it sounds the death knell of any conception of moral education – as well as testifying to the incoherence of a constructivist one. In fact, I have elsewhere argued at some length[31] that failing some adequate account of objective religious or spiritual knowledge and truth it is not reasonable to suppose that we might make sense of religious education – perhaps the ultimate bastion of contemporary constructivist thinking about the possibility of a pedagogy for allegedly "subjective" forms of human enquiry. Be that as it may, however, I believe that there is little reason to despair of the possibility of arriving at a coherent account of the nature of objective moral knowledge and truth, for it is plausibly arguable that the basic form of that practical rational enquiry which might bring us closer to such knowledge and truth is indeed discernible in the account which Aristotle gives in the *Nicomachean Ethics* of the way in which *phronesis* operates through the moral virtues.

But the second objection to a traditional conception of moral education as a kind of initiation into some set of actual virtues is based more on the idea that, even if there is such a thing as moral truth, it is not self-evidently the exclusive property of any one moral community, and hence any initiation of individuals into this view rather than that must constitute a closing of their minds to all alternative moral possibilities. At one level, of course, this objection once more reflects the already familiar confusion between the idea of inculcating a repertoire of moral virtues and initiating into a system of moral beliefs. But although one can hardly, of course, cultivate virtues other than in the context of some framework of moral beliefs, the precise epistemic content of the beliefs – if the educational focus is upon the aretaic, as it were, rather than the deontic[32] – may not, within

reason, matter that much at all; indeed, the only condition would be that the belief system through which any moral education sought to work would allow for the expression and promotion in some recognisable form of those basic human values embodied by such familiar virtue-dispositions as courage, self-control, honesty, fairness and so on – and, it hardly needs to be said that any belief system which could not accommodate such basic values would hardly be worthy of the name of a morality at all. However, the objection also seems to miss the point, consistent with first account of constructivism, that the idea of open enquiry or creative innovation only really makes sense in context – in short, that we can only really expect original thought and action with respect to any field of human endeavour to come from minds thoroughly immersed in the best that has already been thought and done; thus, the great moral saints and reformers are not those who are ignorant of past progress and achievement, but those for whom this sets a worthy precedent. Of course, it is true that bad teaching can inhibit and stunt the growth of the mind in any area of enquiry; but it is the grossest fallacy to argue from this, in the manner of Rousseau or Neill, that we ought therefore to abandon explicit instruction altogether.

5. POSTSCRIPT

On the contrary, what is required is to develop modes of instruction which open received forms of knowledge and wisdom to the possibility of deeper critical understanding – and this is as true of our aspirations towards progress in the development of our moral character and conduct in formal and other contexts of education as elsewhere. According to a well-thumbed contemporary analogy we may view initiation into a form of knowledge and enquiry on the model of something like the learning of a language or entry into a form of conversation. But, on this view, there cannot be much doubt that it is the person who has already learned one language and gained entry into some forms of conversation who is better placed to learn new languages or get into new conversations than the person who has learned none. And, of course, what is needed for the mastery of a second language is largely what is required for the mastery of a first one – roughly what linguists refer to as a transformational grammar. Confronted by the Babel of contemporary moral tongues and conversations the virtue-theorist maintains that what is needed to help us sort what is false or base from what is true and worthwhile in moral life is a basic grammar of evaluative practical thought, character and conduct of essentially the sort provided by Aristotle in his accounts of the logic of virtue and *phronesis* in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. But, as recent post-analytical social philosophers writing under the inspiration of Aristotle[33] have also forcefully insisted, this can only be developed on the basis of detailed descriptive attention to the various languages and narratives of virtue that men have actually lived, acted and spoken – rather than on that of a revisionary attempt to reconstruct the logical form of moral life and discourse according to *a priori* prescriptions engendered on a view from nowhere.

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NOTES

[1] J.J. Rousseau: *Emile*, London: Dent, Everyman's Library, 1974, p. 54.
[2] L. Kohlberg: *Essays on Moral Development: Volumes I–III*, New York: Harper Row, 1981.
[3] This is particularly true, of course, in North America, where the main professional organization concerned with the promotion of research into moral education and development in the U.S.A and Canada – the American Moral Education Association – was founded and is still mainly controlled by Kohlbergians.
[4] See, J. Piaget: *The Moral Judgement of the Child*, New York: Free Press, 1932.
[5] I have said more about this in an extended critical review for this journal of James Jarrett's The Teaching of Values, entitled: The philosophy and theory of values education, *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, Volume 13, 1995.
[6] For a general statement of this criticism see, for example, D. Wright: *The Psychology of Moral Development*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971, chapter 7.
[7] C. Gilligan: *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1982.
[8] See various essays by R.S. Peters in: *Moral Development and Moral Education*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981.
[9] This suggestion seems to be a feature of Mary Warnock's discussion of moral education in her: *Schools of Thought*, London: Faber, 1977; and also, more recently of Owen Flanagan's discussion of the moral virtues in *his: Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism*, Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 1991.
[10] For the source of this view see, I. Kant: *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* – translated by H.J. Paton under the title of *The Moral Law*, London: Hutchinson, 1948.
[11] For the source of this view see, Aristotle: *The Nichomachean Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925.
[12] Kohlberg: *op. cit.*, 1981, Volume I, Part I, Chapter 2.
[13] Aristotle: *op. cit.*, 1925, especially Book 2.
[14] A.C. MacIntyre: *How to appear virtuous without actually being so*, University of Lancaster: Centre for the Study of Cultural values, 1991.
[15] See, for example, A.C. MacIntyre: *After Virtue*, Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1981; *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?*, Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1987; and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1992.
[16] T. Nagel: *The View from Nowhere*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
[17] See my: The primacy of the virtues in ethical theory: Part 2, *Cogito*, Volume 10, Number 1, 1996.
[18] Aristotle; *op. cit.*, 1925, p. 56.

[19] C. Taylor: *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
[20] Aristotle: *op. cit.*, 1925, Book II, Section 2.
[21] For a useful recent overview of such problems see, D. McNaughton: *Moral Vision*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988.
[22] Aristotle: *op. cit.*, 1925, Book II, especially Sections 6–9.
[23] See, for example, D. Ross: *Aristotle*, London: Methuen University Paperbacks, 1964, Chapter 7, p. 205.
[24] Aristotle: *op. cit.*, 1925, Book II, Section 1.
[25] I have attempted to say something further about this issue in a paper entitled – Varieties of incontinence: the nature and significance of the problem of moral weakness in relation to moral education – some of which originally formed part of an extended previous version of this paper.
[26] P.F. Strawson: *Individuals*, London: Methuen, 1959.
[27] See my Moral and religious education 5–14, *Scottish Educational Review*, Volume 24, Number 2, 1992.
[28] The source perhaps most commonly cited in support of this view is T.S. Kuhn: *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.
[29] See, A.S. Neill: *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Education*, London: Gollancz, 1965.
[30] For extensive use of this idea see, C. Taylor: *op. cit.*, 1989, especially Part 1.
[31] See my: Knowledge and truth in religious education, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Volume 28, Number 2, 1994.
[32] See, M. Slote: *From Morality to Virtue*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
[33] Among the leading contemporary figures in this respect – some of whose works have been referred to in the course of this paper – are Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor and Martha Nussbaum.