EDUCATING THE VIRTUES

An essay on the philosophical psychology of moral development and education

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To the memory of
Alderman Alfred Carr J.P. 1893–1960.

PREFACE

Two of my previously published papers were in fact the survivors of an abortive attempt in late 1982 to compose a full length work on moral education focused on the nature of the virtues. The first of these, which was published in *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (1983) under the title 'Three approaches to moral education', led to further work on moral education – in particular, to a paper 'Aristotle and Durkheim on moral education' which I was invited to read at a conference on moral education and character organised by the US Department of Education in Washington during the summer of 1987. I am grateful to the US Department of Educational Research for allowing me to use parts of that paper for the writing of chapters 5 and 11 of the present work.

The second paper which survived the debacle of my 1982 project was presented to a London meeting of the Aristotelian Society in the autumn of 1984 and subsequently published in the *Proceedings* under the title 'Two kinds of virtue'. Again, I am very grateful for permission to use much of that paper (© The Aristotelian Society 1984, reprinted by courtesy of the editor) as the basis of chapter 9 of this work. I have also drawn in this work on ideas from several other previously published papers on moral philosophy and education written in the wake of these two earlier ones, of course, but in this respect I am particularly indebted to the Philosophy of Education Society and their publishers Carfax for permission to reproduce parts of my 1985 article 'The free child and the spoiled child' in chapter 6.

The present work, then is the product of a renewed attempt, in response to a publisher's invitation, to accomplish what

I started out but failed to do almost a decade ago. During the eighteen months or so I have spent on this task I have, of course, benefited from the co-operation, inspiration and assistance of very many people. First of all, I am most grateful to Principal Gordon Kirk and the Research and Development Committee of Moray House College for their enthusiastic response to my request for time for writing and research and also to my many colleagues who shared and bore the burden of my administrative and teaching duties during a term of sabbatical leave I was kindly granted for the autumn of 1988. I am also profoundly grateful to the Department of Moral Philosophy at the University of St Andrews for their kind and most unexpected offer of hospitality during that term as a research fellow in their Centre for Philosophy and Public Affairs. In particular, I am indebted to Dr John Haldane, then director of the Centre, for his constant support and encouragement of my work, then and since, and for his eleventh hour advice on a final title for this book.

My time at the St Andrews' Centre also provided me, via several kind invitations to speak in various Scottish Universities, with valuable opportunities to test out some of the more controversial ideas aired in Section III of this work. Chapter 10, then, is a remote and several times revised descendant of a calamitous paper on moral motivation which I presented to the Dundee philosophers in early autumn and they are due both my apologies for such a poor show and my thanks for the courteous way in which they gave me the benefit of the doubt. Chapter 11, however, is more closely related to a much happier and more successful presentation on virtue and wisdom which I gave to the philosophers in the University of Aberdeen in December and once again I am grateful both for the splendid critical response and – especially to Dr Nigel Dower – for the hospitality I received at that time.

During the winter and spring of 1988–9, I was also privileged to come to know two other St Andrews' Centre fellows – Professor Richard Brook of Bloomsburg, PA, and Professor Rick Werner of Hamilton College, NY – to whom I also owe an immense debt of gratitude for their moral support, their encouragement of my work and, above all, their friendship. I am extremely grateful for all the critical responses of those who have been exposed to the ideas and reflections which have

contributed to the making of this book but especially to my friend and erstwhile colleague Dr Ieuan Williams of University College Swansea who kindly and patiently read through the entire typescript of this work. Last but not least I am profoundly indebted to Sheila, Claire, Gladys and other members of the office staff in Moray House College at Cramond for their meticulous, tireless and uncomplaining secretarial assistance with respect to the transcription of this work during a very busy term. Finally, it goes without saying that the final responsibility for any confusions and mistakes in this work lies entirely with me.

David Carr

Moray House College,
December 1989

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INTRODUCTION

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that we do not live in an age of moral certainty. In the so-called multi-cultural and pluralist societies which characterise much of the modern world it has become standard practice to submit traditional moral, religious and social beliefs or values to rigorous scrutiny; a particular attitude of rational scepticism appears to have become the order of the day. It is also sensible to concede, moreover, that there is much about this modern scepticism which is reasonable enough and that we should be foolish to regret the passing of precisely some of the moral certainties of earlier human societies and epochs. The cruel and oppressive fanaticisms which, it will be said, have stained the childhood and adolescence of human evolution with the blood of innocents and martyrs are no longer to be tolerated at the coming of age of civilised man. Thus a degree – even a large degree – of healthy scepticism about traditional moral, religious and social beliefs is the most valuable weapon we have in the fight against the exploitation, injustice and oppression that some of those beliefs have endorsed.

But it is also clear – from the history of philosophy for example – that scepticism can be taken too far, to extremes that are themselves not just irrational but dangerous. So whereas it was largely the aim of past great moral philosophers up until the early modern period (let us here regard Kant as the high water mark) to give an account of the conceptual or epistemological basis not just of our moral disagreements but also of our moral *agreements*, it seems to have been the aim of some of the moral sages of middle and late modernity (the first crucial figure here, I suppose, is Nietzsche) to drill out the very foundations of our ordinary moral thinking by arguing that all our basic beliefs and

values are in principle suspect or susceptible of revision. This more radical scepticism concerning the possibility of any objective basis for our common moral values, practices and judgements has, especially when reinforced with the modern encounter with cultural diversity, gradually filtered down in modern times not only into the work of academic moral philosophers but into the attitudes and beliefs of ordinary popular consciousness.[1]

But whilst it seems to be a reasonable enough human procedure to question traditional moral values, beliefs and practices wherever they may seem to be suspect, it is also arguably little short of insane to embark on an enterprise of questioning *every* moral value or practice on principle. Thus I am inclined to the view that the older moral philosophers like Plato, Aristotle and Kant were right to believe that there must be some ground of moral certainty or at least of objectivity even if, as I shall argue, some of them looked for it in unlikely places. This view seems to me to rest on a simple logical or conceptual point; just as there can be no counterfeit coins unless there are also real ones there can be no morally suspect or disreputable points of view unless there are also morally sound or reputable ones.[2] Moreover, we could not reasonably enter into intelligible disagreement about moral questions in the absence of some background of moral agreement shared by the opposed points of view.

It is common for philosophers of science to refer to a famous metaphor or analogy used by the Austrian logical positivist philosopher Otto Neurath to illustrate the nature of scientific progress.[3] With respect to his scientific theories, then, the scientist is roughly in the position of a sailor at sea in a leaky ship. Since it is not possible for him whilst he is afloat to dismantle his ship and rebuild it entirely, he must locate the leaks as best he can and patch the boat where they occur. The analogy is usually construed as a direct attack on epistemological foundationalism in science, as expressive of a perspective which regards it as futile for scientists to search for fundamental and incorrigible principles, laws and procedures upon which an absolutely certain and foolproof science might be constructed. Scientific theory and practice is a complex web or network of principles and procedures of varying degrees of soundness and reliability which it makes little sense to try to test or revise all at one go. Much the same point, I believe, can be made about our

moral perspectives and practices; these too comprise a complicated network of principles and procedures which – like the sailor at sea in his leaky boat – we are stuck with and which we must adjust where necessary in a piecemeal fashion because we cannot overturn the lot all at once.

But what this image also suggests is that although it is only sensible to admit that there is considerable uncertainty in moral life, this cannot mean that there is *total* uncertainty; like the seaborne sailor we must trust that some planks are watertight or will bear our weight – in this case the planks, as it were, of moral thought and practice – in order to be able to replace the rotten ones. In fact, however, the radical moral scepticism which affects or infects popular modern thought has usually taken two principal forms – the subjectivism which says that since there are no objective moral truths I must make up my own and the relativisim which maintains that since there are no absolute or universally valid moral principles or truths we might as well stick with the social and moral customs we already have.[4] The moral subjectivist is a bit like the sailor who tries to reconstruct his ship whilst still at sea and the moral relativist stands in considerable danger of being like one who turns a blind eye to the leaks and neglects to maintain his ship at all.

The problem seems to be, oddly enough, that both these kinds of sceptic – the subjectivist and the relativist – share a common ideal of certainty, though it is a certainty for which it is not really reasonable to seek; they both require a kind of fully comprehensive moral insurance which will guarantee them totally against unforseen disasters – new moral 'leaks' in unexpected places. Like the older natural philosophers who sought for an incorrigible system of ground rules or principles upon which the whole edifice of scientific enquiry and practice might be rationally constructed, the modern moral sceptics have sought in vain for a foundational set of hard and fast principles on the basis of which the whole of human moral life might be constructed or from which all moral precepts might be derived. Being unable to discover such hard and fast or incontrovertible principles in any realm of human experience they have resorted either to making them up – abandoning objectivity and underwriting certainty with personal commitment – or abandoning certainty they have clung onto what objectivity they could find

by committing themselves to the social conventions and moral codes nearest to hand.

In fact, however, these ways of proceeding have got things almost entirely the wrong way round, for we do not start with moral principles and proceed to moral practices, but – like the pilot of Neurath's craft – we find ourselves involved in a going concern, landed with certain moral practices and relationships, enmeshed in a complex web of ties of human community and association, in relation to which our moral codes represent an attempt to make some sort of sense. The moral principles that we have, then, are the product of a fallible human attempt to understand the web of moral association by reference to consideration of both a general and a particular kind about what sorts of conduct conduce to good and ill, wellbeing and harm, in human affairs; in short, the principles are underwritten by the practices, not the practices by the principles.

At this point two possible misconceptions about what has been said so far may need guarding against. First, it should be re-emphasised that the use of Neurath's metaphor to criticise foundationalism in moral thinking should not be construed as tantamount to a denial that there *can be* any moral certainties – that it is just not possible to form judgements of an objective character concerning what is morally right or wrong. To attack moral foundationalism is merely to reject the view that it is possible to discern any hard and fast incontrovertible *axioms* or *principles* from which our particular moral judgements might be deductively inferred or upon which our moral conduct might be rationally based. To affirm that the rough and ready moral principles that we have are underwritten by our actual moral practices, however, is precisely to acknowledge that there are genuine if general criteria of moral right and wrong, good and evil, to be discovered in the rough and tumble of human interpersonal relations and conduct.

Precisely they are to be discovered in those general human dispositions to good and ill, excellence and baseness, which are ordinarily called virtues and vices and with the nature of which this work is centrally concerned. It is the familiar enough human discourse of virtue and vice, in terms of which we ordinarily characterise human moral character and conduct, which is our best guide to the formulation of reliable moral precepts and principles. As we shall see, however, the moral virtues are very

definitely not hard and fast principles which may be applied to any conceivable circumstances but general patterns or tendencies of conduct which require reasonable and cautious adjustment to particular and changing circumstances and which may even, in some situations, compete with each other for preference and priority. They are not so much the foundations of morality, then, if by this is meant a hard bedrock of principles upon which all moral conduct is based – rather they are the templates upon which the general contours of moral life are modelled; precisely, they are *criteria* rather than *axioms*.

The other possible source of misunderstanding concerning these observations about the pre-eminence of concepts of virtue for our thinking about the nature of moral life and ideas of right and wrong arises in relation to the notion of relativism. If, as appears to be widely believed, the notions of virtue and vice are socially defined and the practice of the moral virtues is a social phenomenon, must not any concepts of virtue and moral practice generally be relative to particular societies? In short, doesn't the attempt to explain moral life in terms of such heavily socially-implicated dispositions as the virtues, simply readmit the bogy of moral relativism by the back door? I think that the short answer here – we shall have much more to say in due course – is that it does not. It is clear enough that concepts of virtue and vice – however they may be differently interpreted in different societies – are nevertheless employed by all human agents to submit the range of available social, religious and political practices to question as unjust, self-serving, exploitative or whatever.

The crucial point is that although the moral virtues are often if not always socially-implicated dispositions, they are so in the very general and innocuous sense in which *all* human conduct is social, but not necessarily if at all in the very narrow or dubious sense of being ideologically or doctrinally biased. It is clear that the moral virtues operate at a much more fundamental level of human life, experience and interpersonal dealings than that with which particular religious or political creeds are concerned. To be sure, then, we live as human beings in a variety of different ways and according to diverse social customs but it is also true that fundamentally we all share a common physical or biological nature which inclines us to find pleasure, hurt, wellbeing, security and love in roughly the same places; so

though it is easy enough to recognise two different interpretations or expressions of courage or charity in two different societies (or, for that matter, in the same society) it is hard to envisage a human community in which these qualities are not needed, recognised or held to be of any value at all.

Thus, though in one sense there are different versions of virtue – different ideas about how courage might be expressed, for example, by war or through pacifism – in another more profound sense it is certainly not true that we count *any* quality as courage except that which involves remaining resolute or not losing one's nerve in dangerous, difficult or painful circumstances and that must logically be the case for any human agent (as well as what renders rational debate about the nature and value of courage possible between members of different societies).

At any rate, in this work I have taken the view that some definite initiation into those virtues or qualities ordinarily acknowledged in the familiar human discourse of fundamental human association must lie at the heart of the moral education of *all* children and that parents and teachers who fail to acquaint their children with these fundamental dispositions of moral life are seriously reneging on the full educational implications of their roles as parents and teachers. It is clear enough, however, both from much recent literature about education and on the basis of observations of much contemporary social life that the various agencies of education *have* wavered about this – scared off perhaps by various bogies of indoctrination or illiberalism. Perhaps the most influential perspective on moral education of modern educational traditionalism is one that explicitly disparages and rejects what it calls the 'bag of virtues' approach and which is inclined rather, it seems, to try to get children thinking for themselves, more or less from scratch, about moral questions; other very influential brands of modern educational progressivism have in the name of some liberal notion of tolerance repudiated the idea of moral education altogether.[5]

It is my belief that these various views which cast suspicion on the idea of a basic moral education of the virtues are merely symptomatic of a failure of nerve on the part of moral educationalists which is itself the result of their subscription to certain dubious doctrines about moral life of a foundationalist nature. But be that as it may, it seems to be no more than a matter of

common sense to recognise that most of the modern reservations about a basic moral education of the virtues under the influence of the bogy of indoctrination are just confused anyway; there is nothing but a dangerous muddle in the wake of the view that teaching, even instructing, a child in self-control is a matter of indoctrination or of a serious curtailment of his freedom.

The present work is intended to be one of moral education rather than moral philosophy – or, at any rate, it is intended as a contribution to the conceptual geography of problems about moral education from which the efforts of a more obviously practical kind of parents, teachers and other educationalists might derive some heart or inspiration. To that end, although I have not been able to avoid fairly protracted discussions of past and present moral philosophical theory, I have also engaged in equally extensive critical discussions of several important views of moral education and child development hailing from the social sciences.

I trust that it will be clear enough without much need for elaboration here why some discussion of various classical theories of morality and virtue is a prerequisite of any satisfactory treatment of moral education – it is roughly, of course, because we need to understand what kinds of items moral values, attitudes and dispositions are before we can see clearly what may be required to promote their growth. All the same, it should be said that I have here pursued the enquiry in my own highly idiosyncratic and selective way and students in search of an introductory text to the history of moral philosophy might be well advised to look elsewhere than to this volume; my survey of moral philosophies probably excludes more than it includes and so I doubt whether any very clear view of the history of the subject could be gained from this work.

But if the present work is undeniably unsatisfactory from this more refined theoretical end of things it is also very likely to be regarded as unsatisfactory from the more practical end as well. Many a professional educationalist approaching this book in the currently rather untheoretical climate of thinking about educational questions is bound to be struck by the observation that whilst purporting to be an essay concerned with the practical business of education, it nevertheless eschews any discussion of the practical apparatus of pedagogy and curriculum that might

be considered necessary for implementing programmes of moral education.

Thus, this essay includes no attempt to develop a formal programme of study, contains no lesson plans, engages in no discussion of teaching methods, techniques, skills or strategies and the currently fashionable educational talk of 'management skills', 'delivering the curriculum' and so on is studiously avoided. Concerning these alleged omissions, however, I remain obstinately unrepentant. In fact, if the general drift of the present work is understood at all, it should also be grasped that nothing of this nature has here been omitted that does not trade in either the largely vacuous or the downright fatuous.

My basic view is that *all* the major mistakes about the moral educational role of the teacher with respect to the moral development of others to which people are nowadays inclined are based on *misconceptions* or *misunderstandings* of the nature of moral life from which have followed certain failures of nerve concerning the legitimacy of a fairly familiar and informal sort of enterprise. In short, teachers fail in the task of moral education not primarily on account of their lack of any pedagogical skill or technique or of a coherent curriculum theory, but rather because they have only an uncertain grasp of what moral life actually means.

There is a crucial sense, moreover, in which adequately grasping what moral life means is hardly consistent with failing to construct or reconstruct one's personal relations with others in a manner from which the only moral educational effects that we can reasonably hope for follow naturally enough. To be sure, merely being able to recognise what a morally decent life looks like is hardly of itself enough to turn us into the kind of people who are shining examples to others – for most of us much effort is still required to acquire the honesty, tolerance, self-control and so on which are at once both instrumental to and constitutive of such a life – but to understand adequately what a morally good life is, is to grasp that that life is worth aspiring to and also to acquire *some* insight into the right direction in which one should proceed.

But to recognise this is also to comprehend that a morally sound life is essentially a matter of *personal* effort and aspiration – not 'personal', of course, in the sense of 'subjective' or 'idiosyncratic' – but personal meaning that no one can do it for

us. To this extent, however, all talk in relation to moral education of pedagogical skills, strategies and techniques, of management styles or delivering the curriculum becomes not just beside the point but runs *counter to* the point; a life characterised by those human excellences called the moral virtues is precisely not something which we accept because it has been required of or imposed on us, but something to which we aspire when we too have discerned the great value of those qualities of integrity, honesty, discipline, tolerance, care, courtesy and so on which shine forth in the lives and conduct of those who, with luck, have been charged with the task of instructing us.

What, of course, all this means is that moral education cannot be regarded as just another subject in the curriculum like physics or maths and that any pedagogy appropriate to its promotion is hardly susceptible of analysis in terms of techniques for the transmission or communication of academic theories or information. The supreme human value and significance of the moral virtues can be recognised only in their power to transform lives for the better in terms of individual character and social relations; we appreciate the worth of qualities of moral character by observing how they operate in the lives of others – admiring Miss Smith for her honesty and concern for others at the same time as we despise Mr Jones for his meanness and ill-temper.

But it follows also from this that the fundamental moral virtues cannot be learned in any context of socialisation or education apart from the example of those parents, teachers and friends who are able to exhibit to some degree how they work for the good in human life. Moreover, lacking the example of those who possess positive moral qualities, young people may well take as their models of behaviour those who possess only negative qualities – Mr Jones who is shifty, sarcastic and bullying.

So far, then, I have argued that proper moral education requires a full or adequate appreciation of the important contribution that certain basic moral dispositions have to make to any worthwhile form of human life, that the only sure indicator of such appreciation is that a person clearly aspires to possessing the qualities in question and that the example of such aspiration (none of us can hope to afford much more than this) is the *sine*