



THE
JUBILEE CENTRE
FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Keeping the Baby and the Bathwater: a developmental and pedagogical lens on character and virtue education

Marvin W. Berkowitz

This is an unpublished conference paper for the 4th Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 7th – Saturday 9th January 2016.
These papers are works in progress and should not be cited without author's prior permission.



I am not a philosopher. I never have been and likely never will be. I deeply respect and value philosophers, well most of them, but I cannot do what they can do. Hence I will take a pass on the daunting enterprise of analytically mapping the semantic and conceptual terrain of this field which the Jubilee Centre labels as “character and virtues.” I will leave that to my distinguished philosopher colleagues, James Arthur, David Carr, Kristjan Kristjansson, Randy Curren, Julia Annas, Nancy Snow and the rest of the philosophers at this conference and in this field. Instead, I will leap over this conceptual morass right into the realms of social science and pedagogy. But to make this more palatable to the philosophers, I will simply layer a thin veneer of philosophy onto this argument by engaging in faux philosophy and pretending that I am being analytical and philosophical. Hopefully you won’t mind.

The social science field of most direct relevance here is about the positive, ethical, pro-social development of children and adolescents, or, as we have defined it elsewhere, the complex set of psychological characteristics that motivate and enable an individual to function as a competent moral agent (Berkowitz, 2012). The related pedagogical field then is about how to nurture such development in educational contexts.

I will begin however with an attempt to set the context for this argument. Many years ago, when I was a consultant to the Gordon Cook Foundation in Scotland, I wrote a monograph about the field of character education (Berkowitz, 1995), which is the term I have subsequently used for almost 20 years; however, like all the other terms strewn across the landscape of this field, it is far from ideal. Indeed this analysis is analogous to Churchill’s famed estimation of democracy, “No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed **it has been said** that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time” (Churchill, 2008, p. 574). Character education may be the worst term for this field, except for all the others. So I will stick with it for now, but I will mean by it the education of the composite set of psychological characteristics that motivate and enable individuals to function as competent moral

agents, and those characteristics include much of what is labeled alternatively as values, virtues, character traits, social-emotional competences, positive psychological characteristics, etc.

In the Gordon Cook monograph (Berkowitz, 1995), I invoked a set of metaphors for the problems of labeling and bounding this field, and two decades later those metaphors are still quite apt. One metaphor is the Indian fable of the blind men and the elephant. Those touching the social and emotional competencies of the moral elephant perceiving and naming it as Social-Emotional Learning, those touching one of the classic Aristotelian virtues naming it Virtue Ethics or Virtues Education, those touching the socio-moral critical thinking naming it moral education, etc. This leads us to the second metaphor: the Tower of Babel. A plethora of languages (or terms, in this case) tends to undermine effective collaboration and synthesis. The solution is to find a common language. I have however become quite jaundiced about the prospects of finding a consensual terminology for the field, having watched the semantic pendulum swing not just back and forth but all over the place over the past half century. Hence the final metaphor: the children's fable of Humpty Dumpty. Like poor shattered Humpty Dumpty, once the blind men had broken the moral person into pieces, it seemed impossible to get them or "all the King's horse and all the King's men" to reassemble and consequently educate for "the complete moral person" (Berkowitz, 1995). That is precisely the project I proposed 20 years ago, and which I began with the articulation of a "moral anatomy" of the "complete moral person."

Regardless of whether we can agree on terminology or a taxonomy of human goodness, we must and can do our best to move forward on the critical world-healing project of fostering the development virtuous people. Certainly one could treat this project as a purely academic, theoretical, or conceptual problem. That, however, is not how I have been nor currently am approaching it. While I have not always reflectively understood why I do what I do nor how I frame this project, I have more recently been struggling with that insight.

Part of what I have come to conclude about why I focus on character development and education relates to my own heritage. I am Jewish. In the Jewish tradition, there is a concept called

“tikkum olam.” It dates to the very origins of the written records of the Jewish tradition (the third century A.D.) and was expanded in medieval times through Jewish mystical traditions. It literally means “to heal the world.” One understanding is that it comes from a version of the creation story in which God’s creation of the world required the destruction of materials and vessels from which the world was crafted. Creation was imperfect and left damage. Hence the charge to humankind, the fruits of divine creation, was to leverage the fact of creation to heal the world. It is a spiritual and moral obligation. To do so in the Jewish tradition means two things: (1) to follow Jewish laws and traditions; and (2) to do good in the world, to make the world a better place. It is the latter task, a very practical task, that should drive the scholarship and practice of character education. We should do it in order to make the world a better place, a more moral, more caring and just, place for all.

Faux Philosophy

Now I will turn to building an argument for a holistic, developmental, robust, and effective model for thinking about both human goodness (character, virtue) and how to design schools and classrooms that foster the growth of human goodness in students. In doing so, I will now begin my attempt at faux philosophy. Remember, forgiveness is a virtue.

First, I will give an overview of the conceptual project. Then I will make three specific moves to support my position. The first move is meta-ethical, the second naturalistic, and the third pragmatic. Perhaps my veneer of philosophy will lull the large number of philosophers in the audience into a false sense of security.

Overview

Now I will present the overview of my argument. If we posit that character education ought to, at least in many cases, be practical, then we can assert that, in order to be practical, we need to do what actually works and to do so in ways that are likely to be embraced by those who will be charged with enacting them, and hence be effective. In other words, we need a model of character,

and, consequently, character education, that is both veridical and likely to be effectively employed to generate effective character education practices, programs and approaches.

In this paper, I will argue for taking a more holistic and organic perspective on character and a more limited and cross-cutting perspective on character education. In so doing, I will argue for a more veridical and complex understanding of character and the necessity for a simpler conceptualization of character education, a seemingly antithetical juxtaposition. This is in contrast to the more simplistic and yet common focus on a single or narrow set of virtues and correspondingly narrow and targeted interventions designed to impact such a single or narrow set of virtues or a cumbersome and impractical mélange of disparate strategies to each impact individual virtues or small sets of virtues.

This argument will entail three moves. While the moves will be presented sequentially and discretely, they are in fact highly inter-connected. First, I make a naturalistic argument for developmental holism, or the fact that humans ought to be understood as complex systems of inter-related parts rather than as sets of discrete, and what are, at best, loosely connected characteristics. The second move will be a meta-ethical argument that a fully moral being (which ought to be the goal of practical character education) requires a complete set of virtues, and not merely one or two which happen to be of interest to a researcher, scholar, or funder. The third and final move will be a pragmatic argument that, for the sake of efficiency, a limited set of cross-cutting or common denominator implementation strategies, that alone and together impact the development of a broad set of character outcomes, is more practical than a much larger and disconnected set of “designer interventions” created narrowly to each impact a single virtue.

The First Move: Naturalism and the Holistic Nature of Human Goodness

The philosopher G. Spencer-Brown started his book *Laws of Form* (1969) with the statement “draw a line.” The point was that knowing required distinctions. We could argue that humans are made to make distinctions. The psychologist Heinz Werner’s (1973) “orthogenetic principle” essentially said that all development came from two processes: integration and

differentiation, with the former the propensity for making connections and the latter focusing on making distinctions (or specializations). The dualisms that populate the terrain of psychology (e.g., introversion/extraversion, left brain/right brain, etc.) are the most basic form of such epistemic distinctions. Theories, on the other hand, are examples of the propensity and utility of integration. Theories are ways to show connections between phenomena, and typically by simplifying the complexity of the population of phenomena to which they are directed. The reification of the theories leads to the over-simplification of the object of knowing of that particular theory. This is particularly true in the field of social science, including psychology. I have often told my students that the human mind is too complex for the human mind to comprehend. An entire sub-specialty of psychology, called theory of mind, is in fact an attempt to understand how people understand human thinking.

This applies to character development as well. I will not attempt to present a rich interpretation of Aristotelian virtue ethics, as I am not competent to do so, and we have many here who are competent to do, have done so (e.g., Kristjánsson, 2015) and will continue to do so. But we can justifiably consider Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1985) to be an attempt to explore the complexity of human goodness, well before psychology ever developed as a scholarly discipline. Aristotle argued for the unity of virtues, offered a complex list of virtues and did not close the door on there being yet more, suggested hierarchies of virtues (with some being more important than others), and pointed to integrative or superordinate virtues (megalopsychia or greatmindedness, and phronesis or virtue of thought) necessary for complete virtue (Kristjánsson, 2007).

Psychologists however have tended to deconstruct holistic human goodness into sub-areas. This is quite understandable as the study of a single virtue or psychological attribute of goodness (character trait, social-emotional competency, etc.) can occupy a scholar's entire career. Here, however, is precisely where we lose the baby with the bathwater. In focusing on a single or narrow set of aspects of character, we not only ignore the other aspects, we lose the naturally holistic nature of human goodness. We routinely do this, despite the many cases where such deconstructions have

done violence to the actual nature of human beings. A case in point is the old nature/nurture controversy. The question asked was a dualistic one: is development due to nature (i.e., biology) or due to nurture (i.e., experience)? Because it was a question that was distortive of reality, the answer was meaningless. After amassing a large set of empirical studies in both camps, the answer to the question “Is development due to nature or nurture?” was clearly “yes, it is.” There was ample evidence on both sides of the argument. The framing of a question clearly matters, as does the perilous enterprise of deconstructing the person. My colleague Wolfgang Althof, in making this point, uses the question “Does water burn?” If one deconstructs water into its constituent parts, hydrogen and oxygen, the answer is “yes” as both elements (hydrogen, oxygen) that comprise the water molecule burn. But that does not mean the combination as a relatively complex system operates as its parts do. Water does not burn. Humans should not be reduced to a set of discrete characteristics either, or we risk completely misunderstanding the nature of the naturally holistic organism.

Another psychological window on the challenge of holism has to do with two important psychological concepts: identity and motivation. Kohlberg (1981), in his grappling with higher stages of conceptualizing moral justification, differentiated the fundamental philosophical questions of “what is moral?” (ethics) from “why be moral?” (meta-ethics) in the psychological realm. This is in fact where moral identity and moral motivation come into the picture. Once one has identified what is moral, there is still the question of whether one will choose to follow the moral course or not. This question is far too complex for this paper. Elsewhere, Wolfgang Althof and I have tackled the question of moral motivation from a psychological perspective (Althof & Berkowitz, 2013). Hardy (2006; Hardy et al., 2013), Pratt (Pratt et al., 2003), and others have explored the psychological nature of moral identity, and Colby and Damon (1993) have pointed to the centrality of moral identity in the life courses of living moral exemplars. The point of all of this is that a fully realized moral person is so because he or she intends to be so. The sources of such moral intentionality come from a sense of self as a moral person. If that sense was merely of being good

as subordinate to other non-moral goals (e.g., being popular, being wealthy, being attractive) or non-existent, then one would not likely become a fully moral person. Furthermore, if this sense of moral self that is focused on a limited aspect of morality (e.g., being grateful, being honest), then again one would not be a fully moral person. Rather, moral identity should be about general goodness; i.e., seeing oneself as a complete moral person, not merely as a moral person in certain ways. The ensuing motivation is to be moral in a wide range of ways, not merely in a limited fashion.

While describing a complex and comprehensive model of character is daunting, doing so for the process of character development, largely due to its dynamic nature, is even more so. Recently Richard Lerner and Kristina Callina (2015) have posited a “relational developmental systems model” (RDS) of character development, and, in so doing, have moved the field forward. Nonetheless, I have argued that even this complex and promising model falls short of the full complexity of the nature of the process of character development (Berkowitz, 2015).

I have thus, in an admittedly incomplete manner, argued that the true nature of human goodness is very complex and is best understood as an integrated system of many parts. Conversely, conceptualizing character as a set of discrete psychological characteristics is not only simplistic and inaccurate, but it has the potential to distort our understanding of the nature of human goodness in very significant ways.

Having made this first naturalistic move, I will now turn to the meta-ethical move.

Move Two: Meta-ethical Understanding of the Fully Moral Person

In this section, I will argue for a psycho-meta-ethical stance that to be considered a good person, one needs to be moral in a holistic and integrated sense. When I make this argument to educators, I do it in the following way. I ask a middle school educator, for example, to think about the high school that their graduates will attend. And then I ask them how they would feel if someone from that high school told them that their graduates were the most scrupulously ethical students when it comes to academic integrity of all the students from all the middle schools that

feed into that high school. Clearly they would take that as an affirmation of the good work they have done in nurturing character in their students. Then I ask them how they would feel if the high school educator continued by saying “unfortunately they are the most sadistic bullies in our school.” We tend to be eager to generalize from partial information about character, but clearly come to a different conclusion when additional and contradictory information becomes available.

The pedagogical and developmental point of this is, if we truly are attempting to support the development of human goodness, of more moral people, as we should be, and not merely to increase the prevalence of a particular aspect of goodness (e.g., academic integrity, compassion), then we need to understand the complexity of human goodness and design our conceptual and intervention models accordingly. Just as we would not want to hire someone who is punctual but dishonest, or have our daughter marry someone who is responsible but unkind, we do not want to educate for incomplete character.

Unfortunately, this raises the bar dramatically for how we go about studying, parenting for, and educating for character development. One of my trepidations about Jason Baehr’s creative and successful creation of a school that focuses on fostering intellectual virtue, was that it would create intellectually scrupulous and effective people without an adequate moral compass. Fortunately, Jason is much wiser than that and his school has focused on both moral and intellectual virtue. This is also my concern with many other character education models, like the highly lauded and successful KIPP schools, which focus on performance character to a marked neglect of moral character. Wise voices throughout history have echoed what US President Teddy Roosevelt said, “to educate a man in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society.” Partial character education is not only incomplete, it may be dangerous.

I have argued that if we want to make a moral world, “tikkun olam,” then we need more moral people. Being moral is, as we established in the first naturalistic move, a holistic enterprise. Goodness is an integrated and broad-ranging set of moral psychological attributes. For character

education to serve this goal, it must be designed to impact this complex broad notion of human goodness. To not do so would be unethical.

This leads us to the third and final move, the pragmatic question of how to do this in an effective and efficient manner.

Move Three: The Pragmatics of Effective Education for Complex Moral Character

The first two moves have argued that character, even specifically moral character, is naturally complex and that human goodness requires the full complexity of moral character, not merely a small part of it. Now we turn to the third and final move, concerning the pragmatic considerations of how to design character education programs that both honor the complexity of holistic character development and are practical and effective models that can realistically be understood and implemented in classrooms and schools. This is in fact where many good intentions become paving stones on the proverbial path to hell.

Much of the current focus on virtue in the social and educational sciences falls prey to the failure to honor the first two moves; i.e., they focus on a single or small subset of moral characteristics (e.g., GRIT, gratitude, forgiveness, honesty, future-mindedness, diligence, etc.). Then, in cases where interventions are created, they are often what I refer to as “designer” character education models; i.e., they are designed specifically around a narrow outcome goal. If I have convincingly addressed the first two moves, it should be apparent why I am far less optimistic about such character education models to serve my underlying goal of *tikkun olam*. We may in fact create GRITty people, but they may be dishonest or sadistic. We may create grateful people but they may cheat and lie and steal.

The immediate obvious implication of the first two moves is that an effective approach to character education would necessarily be extremely complex, and well it could be. However, it need not be. There are two reasons for this. First, while systems theory (Lerner & Callina, 2015) is complex, it is also by nature integrated and systemic, which means a change in one part of the

system has impacts across the entire system. This applies to both the system of an individual's character and the macro-system in which it develops.

The second reason why education for complex morality need not be equally complex is that there are common denominator factors that cut across different aspects of character development. Much of my career has been focused on attempting to identify such common denominators. First, we focused on research on parenting for character, and were able to identify five parenting strategies (Berkowitz & Grych, 1998), that both individually and collectively were associated with a wide range of quite disparate character outcomes (e.g., conscience, moral reasoning, empathy, altruism). Later, in focusing on character education, I was able to identify a set of 14 pedagogical strategies that have empirical support for broadly impacting character development (Berkowitz, 2011). Even that may seem too unwieldy for educational program designers and educational practitioners; hence, I identified five broad foundational approaches to effective character education: authentically prioritizing character education, intentionally fostering healthy relationships among all stakeholders, promoting the internalization of moral values for intrinsic moral motivation, modeling the character outcomes one is targeting, sharing power and empowering all stakeholders (Berkowitz, 2012). It is interesting to note that the common denominator strategies that research supports for parenting for character overlap markedly with the parallel set of effective educational strategies.

In other words, focusing on common denominator, empirically-supported strategies that have been shown to create the system (often referred to as school climate, see www.schoolclimate.org) that nurtures holistic character development allows for a conceptually and practically manageable approach to character education. Such an approach is well beyond the focus and scope of this paper. The point here is that being effective can be pragmatic, particularly if it begins by recognizing the natural holism and ethical integrity of character and character development.

Conclusion

Probably the one thing I have proven in this paper is the veracity of my opening statement. I am not a philosopher. But I did have fun pretending to be one. So if nothing else was accomplished, at least I enjoyed myself.

Hopefully I accomplished more than that, however. What I hope I accomplished is to shine the light more focally on the problem of the common disassembly of the moral person, not merely for philosophical and conceptual reasons, but for ethical and practical reasons. If we truly want the study and practice of character development and character education to make a positive difference in the world, then we have to go about it in a way that is likely to succeed and to do that we have to recognize and honor the natural integrity of moral personhood. A moral world needs moral people, and those people need to be as fully moral as is reasonably possible. Hence, character education needs to create schools and classrooms that are optimally likely to foster the development of integrated, holistic human goodness.

References

Althof, W., & Berkowitz, M.W. (2013). Character and civic education as a source or moral motivation. In K. Heinrichs, F. Oser, & T. Lovat (Eds.), *Handbook of Moral Motivation* (pp. 567-584). Boston: Sense Publishers.

Aristotle (1985). *Nicomachean ethics*, trans T. Irwin. Indianapolis: Hackett.

Berkowitz, M.W. (1995). *The education of the complete moral person*. Aberdeen, Scotland: The Gordon Cook Foundation.

Berkowitz, M.W. (2011). What works in values education. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 50, 153-158.

Berkowitz, M.W. (2012). Moral and character education. In K.R. Harris, S. Graham, and T. Urban (Eds.), *APA Educational Psychology Handbook: Vol. 2 Individual Differences and Cultural and Contextual Factors* (pp.247-264). Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Berkowitz, M.W. (2015). Quantum character: Commentary on Lerner and Schmid Callina. *Human Development*, 57, 354-359.

Berkowitz, M.W., & Grych, J. (1998). Fostering goodness: Teaching parents to facilitate children's moral development. *Journal of Moral Education*, 27, 371-391.

Churchill, W. (2008). *Churchill by himself: The definitive collection of quotations*. New York: PublicAffairs.

Colby, A., & Damon, W. (1993). *Some do care: Contemporary lives of moral commitment*. N.Y: Free Press.

Hardy, S. A. (2006). Identity, reasoning, and emotion: An empirical comparison of three sources of moral motivation. *Motivation and Emotion*, 30, 205–213.

Hardy, S. A., Walker, L.J., Olsen, J.A., Woodbury, R.D., Hickman, J.R. (2013) Moral Identity as Moral Ideal Self: Links to Adolescent Outcomes. *Developmental Psychology*, 50(1), pp. 45-57.

Kohlberg, L. (1981). Moral development, religious thinking, and the question of a seventh stage. In L. Kohlberg (Ed.), *Essays on moral development, Vol 1* (pp. 311-372). San Francisco: Harper and Row.

Kristjánsson, K. (2007). *Aristotle, emotions, and education*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing.

Kristjánsson, K. (2015). *Aristotelian character education*. New York: Routledge.

Lerner, R.M., & Callina, K.S. (2015). Toward a relational-developmental model of character development. *Human Development, 57*, 322-346.

Pratt, M.W., Hunsberger, B., Pancer, M., & Alisa, S. (2003). A Longitudinal Analysis of Personal Values Socialization: Correlates of a Moral Self-Ideal in Late Adolescence. *Social Development, 12*, 564-585.

Spencer-Brown, G. (1969). *Laws of form*. London: George Allen and Unwin.

Werner, H.S. (1973). *Comparative psychology of mental development*. New York: International Universities Press.