Character Education and the Mean of Confidence

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the project of character education with particular reference to the idea of confidence. It raises some sensitive questions: to what extent does our urgent wish to 'enhance children' give rise to excessive confidence about our prospects of success? What kinds of confidence should we hope to inspire in children and adolescents? How should confidence *develop* in the young?

Doubt is cast on the belief that we should always be confident about empirical studies because their evidence base is supposedly unassailable. I explore the confidence to ascribe robust character traits and predict what people will do, finding examples of excessive and deficient confidence in the treatment of these themes, and outlining a developmental view. It is argued that children need the confidence to trust others not to disappear or become monsters, and for this it is essential that adults are trustworthy, exhibiting some robust traits. As they grow older, children need to learn to discriminate between those who do and do not have such traits, are and are not trustworthy. Good judgement is required, which means finding a balance between dogma and scepticism, over-confidence and under-confidence or despair. This Kantian argument is compatible with the philosophy of Aristotle, and I close with some criticisms of character educators who are impatient with the emphasis on judgement, giving cognition priority over perception. It is hard to become virtuous, hard to judge well, and this inconvenient truth should not be ducked.

1. Introduction

"Adult education," said Woody Allen, with a nod of condescension towards the insecure female of the day, "is a wonderful thing". We know what he meant, and can look beyond cliches of belly dancing, cake decoration and other forms of 'edification' to the gifts of community and learning. Character education, we might add, is also a wonderful thing, but this too needs qualification. The cliches are different – we think of education for the elite, the cultivation of traditionally masculine, leadership virtues – but we can see beyond these to the undeniable importance of promoting goodness or decency in the young.

Good-enough parents naturally want to raise good-enough children, and most are keen to enlist the cooperation of other adults, especially teachers, towards this end. They want their children to engage well with others, be committed to and take pleasure in learning, become trustworthy, courageous citizens. Not only parents and teachers but every member of society has a stake in this aspiration. This means there are many people ready to applaud systematic efforts to inculcate virtues in the young.

How does this *readiness to applaud* affect people's ability to think clearly about character education? To what extent does the *wish to enhance children* – underpinning controversial projects

to boost their self-esteem, happiness, well-being or resilience – give rise to excessive, unjustified confidence? These are sensitive questions, and I want to give them an airing. The paper will explore the moral psychology of knowledge in relation to character education: the ways in which emotions like hope, confidence and fear permeate our thoughts about the moral improvement of the young. I shall focus in particular on the idea of confidence. Often the question we need to ask is not 'what is true?', 'what is good?' or 'what can we know?' but 'what is it that properly inspires our confidence?' Should the impressively constructed new pedagogy of character education inspire this? And relatedly: what kinds of confidence do we hope to inspire in children and adolescents, who tend, if they are emotionally healthy, towards over-confidence? What kinds of confidence are good, should be encouraged? How should confidence, ideally, evolve?

2. The confidence to ascribe and predict

That confidence is an important topic should come as no surprise to any philosopher who regards intellectual discomfort or unease as *primary philosophical material*, as Wittgenstein did. One of the difficulties we face in the modern world, in my view, is the hegemony of social science with its explicit or implicit message: you should have total confidence in these assertions, because they are evidence-based. This message underpins the opening of Martin Seligman's book *Flourish* (2011, p.1):

This book will help you flourish. There, I have finally said it. I have spent my professional life avoiding unguarded promises like this one.

This passage, like so many others in Seligman's writings, makes me uneasy. I would defend this reaction as an appropriate response to ebullient, excessive, and potentially bullying confidence. Like others in the positive psychology movement, Seligman is ready to turn nasty when people question his mission. The evidence base is thought to be unassailable, but it does not inspire confidence in everyone (its scientific and ethical credentials have been widely criticised)[1], and this should concern us.

Another piece of empirical research – a social psychology experiment conducted in the 90s – aims to *undermine* our confidence. Ross and Nisbett (1991) discovered that "people are inveterate dispositionists. They account for past actions and outcomes, and make predictions about future actions and outcomes… in terms of… enduring personal dispositions." Research evidence shows, according to the authors, that "dispositionism is false – there are no such traits." What they mean (in addition to an ontological claim) is that the *belief* in such traits is accompanied by confident but unjustified predictions about how people will behave in certain situations. We are confident, for example, that 'helpful people' will assist someone who is struggling with the papers she dropped in a crowded shopping mall. The presence or absence of the trait of helpfulness is (we think) the decisive factor determining who will stop and who will walk on. The experiment shows that we are wrong. The recent discovery of a dime in the slot of a payphone was statistically far more significant than ascriptions of helpfulness as a predictor of who would and would not assist a struggling passer-by. Those who discovered the coin were more likely to stop than those who did not, irrespective of their supposed character traits.

[1] Critics include Barbara Held and Barbara Ehrenreich.

This is an influential experiment; it is discussed sympathetically by philosopher Peter Goldie (2004), who accepts its conclusions with a modification. Dispositionism, he agrees, is false, in so far as the traits in question are believed to be robust. If we think that kind people will always act kindly, because kindness is a robust or enduring trait, we are mistaken. This is because people are complex, they are 'round' not 'flat', and this being so – human desires and motives often conflicting with one another –they often fail. Kind people sometimes fail to act kindly, as honest people sometimes fail to act honestly.

It does not follow, says Goldie, that people lack traits or dispositions. Rather, we should see these as fragile rather than robust. He writes:

Our attributions of traits to others – initially perhaps robust – ought permanently to stand open to correction and refinement as our psychological distance from the other person narrows…(p.67)

As we get closer to people, then, we discover the inadequacy of simple ascriptions. A person is not simply kind or honest; she has a tendency to be kind in this way but not that, in these circumstances but not those, when she is in a good mood but not when she is in a bad mood. This is an advance on Ross and Nisbett's argument. It does not deny that people have dispositions; it asserts that they are complex, not simple. There is a developmental implication, though Goldie does not draw it explicitly. Our 'initially robust' attributions of traits to others should give way as we mature to something more difficult and tentative. In my language, our early confidence that people have enduring traits, enabling confident predictions, should give way to a lack of confidence, a willingness permanently to review our understanding of others, correcting and refining our judgements, keeping expectations in abeyance. This has important, and welcome, implications for education.

In particular, it addresses what might be seen as the excessive confidence of character educators. *A Framework for Character Education in Schools*, by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Values, confidently asserts that character "is educable and its progress can be measured holistically, not only through self-report but also more objective research methods". This means that enduring traits, dispositions to feel, think and act in certain ways, can be successfully inculcated in children through taught courses. These traits are described as virtues, and they include courage, justice, honesty, compassion for others. The confidence to predict behaviour presumably follows, rather as philosopher Rosalind Hursthouse says in relation to people who have the virtue of honesty:

… We expect a reliability in their actions; they do not lie or cheat or plagiarise or casually pocket other people's possessions. You can rely on them to tell you the truth, to give sincere references, to own up to their mistakes, not to pretend to be more knowledgeable than they are; you can buy a used car from them or ask for their opinion with confidence…(quoted by Goldie, 2004, p.64)

This is what the Jubilee Centre seems to be saying. Taught courses can inculcate virtues, and from this point we will be able to rely on children to behave in some ways, but not in others.

It is an attractive proposition. It is one, however, that provokes unease, and part of the reason is surely that it presupposes the existence of robust traits, traits that inspire the confidence to predict what people will do. This confidence may be excessive, but the reason is not, as Ross/Nisbett and Goldie suggest, that robust traits do not exist. Such a denial, which seeks to undermine any confidence we may have in the stable kindness, honesty or courage of others, goes too far, in my

view. What I hope to do in the rest of the paper is tread a careful path between deficient and excessive confidence, as well as the aspirations to undermine on the one hand, and inspire on the other, this attitude or emotion. (It seems clear that confidence is both an attitude and an emotion; its cognitive, affective and motivating aspects are inextricable.) This *care* about establishing the proper mean (in an Aristotelian sense) is essential if we are to make sense of character education. (See Cigman, 2000) The word we give to the mean of confidence is courage; and there is arguably no more important virtue.

3. The confidence to trust and be trusted

We have, on the one hand, confident educators, those who advance an enhancement program in the belief that they can inculcate robust (virtuous) traits in children. We have, on the other hand, reticent researchers and philosophers, who believe that our judgements about the characters of others should be permanently "open to correction and refinement". Goldie sees robust dispositionism as expressive of "an illusory desire for complete understanding of people", a desire to "eliminate the possibility of being surprised". The question of how far one person can really know another has been much debated by philosophers. The idea of "complete understanding" certainly sounds deluded, evoking pictures of friends, parents or lovers whose unthinking confidence in the moral and emotional transparency of others is oppressive. However, transparency is only one of the pictures associated with "complete understanding" of a person. Another, threatened by the reticent approach, is trust.

Children need to make confident predictions that the adults in their worlds will not vanish or metamorphose into monsters. They need, in other words, to learn to trust, and initially their capacity to trust human beings is akin to their capacity to trust the material world. It is a philosophical and psychological commonplace that continuity and regularity are prerequisites for the developing capacity to think and learn. We cannot learn if we cannot trust the ground beneath our feet to remain reasonably fixed, rather than plummeting, disintegrating or swinging like a pendulum. The idea of a good-enough parent is that of an adult who gives the child sufficient love, protection and regularity to enable development and learning to take place.

Children need to trust adults, and if this need is to be met, adults need to be trustworthy. In this sense, they need to have robust traits, enabling confident predictions. Ross and Nisbett talk as though the belief in robust traits is necessarily childish or infantile:

The dispositions [people] favour are suspiciously similar to the trait constructs fabled in song [and] story… [People make] confident trait-based predictions on a small evidence base and [are] unmotivated to increase their evidence base before making predictions. (p.90)

Indeed, children do this, and I am suggesting that they *need* to make some confident trait-based predictions without anxiously pondering whether their evidence base is sufficient to support these. It is not going too far, I think, to say that the trustworthiness of adults in the early lives of children is the basis of two important aspects of evolving character. The first is children's reciprocal trustworthiness; their growing appreciation, drawn from the trustworthiness of their parents and

teachers, of the importance of trust and the perils of its neglect. The second is their evolving capacity to judge the trustworthiness of others.

It is certainly true, as Goldie observes, that many people make confident trait-based predictions on a small evidence base. If these predictions are not realised – the kind person ignores the struggling passer-by – we tend, perversely, to "give the dog a bad name", casting her as cruel or selfish rather than (like all of us) weak. This does not mean that confident trait-based predictions are always illicit; indeed, if we are ever to trust anyone, such predictions are pretty much essential. My friend may be kind or helpful erratically, and we can understand why these traits in particular might be erratic or fragile, for we are sometimes stressed or tired and unable to resist the temptation to put our own needs before those of others. I would hope, however, that my friend is trustworthy, in the sense that she will not be deflected from our relationship, her compassion and concern about me, by the equivalent of a coin that fortuitously appears on a photocopy machine. (An agreeable person comes along, whose friendship she prefers to mine.) I agree with Goldie that Hursthouse's description of an honest person, and what we expect of her, is (as he implies) rose-coloured. This is partly because it focuses on actions (consorting with dishonest/honest people, selling used cars, exaggerating how much we know about something) in a way that is much too specific to belong to a picture of reasonable expectation. The virtue of trustworthiness is more important than the virtue of honesty; the latter carries implications about acts we do not always consider virtuous, like sticking doggedly to trivial truths. Trustworthiness implies action, but not so specifically. As such, it is the kind of robust trait we want both children and adults to believe in, as well as exemplify.

Honesty is on the Jubilee Centre's checklist, and I am suggesting it should be replaced by the more significant, developmentally essential virtue of trustworthiness. It should be an enduring psychological trait, robust not fragile, for the confidence to trust and be trustworthy is crucial for intimacy and the development of character. Does this mean trustworthiness can be taught in classrooms? Sadly, this would be an overconfident assumption, and I shall try to show why it is in excess of the mean.

4. Maturity and the confidence to judge

In *Why Grow Up?* (2014) Susan Neiman presents a Kantian account of maturation as the evolution of reason. Its infancy is dogmatic; small children "incline to take what they are given as absolute truth." This is as it should be for, as I said above, children need some regularity, predictability, if they are to learn. The "wide-eyed credulity of reason's childhood" gives way over time to the sceptical defiance of adolescence. Some adults never progress beyond dogma or scepticism; they may retreat into one or the other, or perhaps they swing capriciously between the two. This is not maturity. Maturity involves the capacity to make judgements, understanding that "none of the answers to the questions that really move us can be found by following a rule." It occupies the space between dogma and scepticism, in no particular way. It is hard to achieve: immaturity – dogma *or* scepticism – is much easier, and Kant (1784) says we choose it because we are lazy and scared. Growing up, as Neiman puts it, "is more a matter of courage than knowledge: all the information in the world is no substitute for the guts to use your own judgement. And judgement can be learned – principally through the experience of watching others use it well – but it cannot be taught." (Ibid, P.6)

Learned but not taught? What does this mean? Again, I want to think about this in relation to confidence. Dogma, I take it, is an excess of confidence, but it is needed for children who are starting to find their way in the world. Scepticism dashes confidence to the ground, and we have the miserable picture of Descartes sitting by his stove unable to muster confidence (intellectually, at least) in the existence of the room, the furniture, even his hand. Luckily for us, Strawson and Wittgenstein taught us that this thought experiment was incoherent. Evil demons and imaginary bodies were confidently abolished, ordinary assumptions about existence confidently restored.

We can restore or undermine confidence through teaching. We can, of course, encourage dogma through teaching by inspiring pupils with excessive confidence about the soundness of what they are taught. Much more doubtful is the possibility of teaching people to judge well, teaching them, in other words, to be wise. We can guide and influence, remind and provoke; we can also encourage them to learn and keep learning from their experiences. Susan Neiman says:

Ideally, you develop good judgement by watching other people who have it, but you can learn from bad examples as well. Since judgement is about particulars, examples are crucial, though deciding which ones are truly exemplary of something important, and which ones are simply oddballs, is a matter of judgement itself. (p.198)

Developing good judgement means negotiating our tendency, marked in childhood and adolescence, to believe we know everything and/or nothing. Adolescence is rife with dogmatic thinking, and it is reasonable to see this as a defensive response to the discovery of a world about which we know next to nothing, in which we shall have terrifyingly to make our way. Maturity pulls these strands together, recognising a temptation to believe we know everything, and the defeat that threatens when this fantasy dissipates. “Refusing to succumb to dogma or despair”; this is Susan Neiman’s pithy rendering of Kant’s account of maturity. We learn to discriminate between these – often haltingly and painfully – by watching people who do it well and people who do it badly. Discriminating between these is itself a matter of judgement, and therein lies the treacherous difficulty of becoming a wise person, a person (as Joe Sachs translates Aristotle’s ‘good/virtuous person’) of ‘serious moral stature’. Becoming virtuous means learning something that cannot be taught – good judgement – and it is hard because this thing we are trying to learn needs to be exercised, impossibly it seems, in judging who we are to learn it from.

The unease about character education, with which I opened this paper, may now be articulated. The project of character education claims Aristotle as its ‘father’, while rejecting a key concept in his ethical thinking. His view of practical rational judgement (phronesis) was compatible with Kant’s. “It belongs to an educated person,” Aristotle famously said, “to look for just so much precision in each kind of discourse as the nature of the thing one is concerned with admits…” (1094 b 23-25) A little later: “… Every discourse that concerns actions is obliged to speak in outline and not precisely… Matters that are involved in actions and are advantageous have nothing rigidly fixed about them, any more than do matters of health.” (1104 a 1-6) Reflecting on what it is to live happily and well, “the judgement is in the perceiving” (Aristotle/Sachs, 2002, 1109b24), and the temptation to codify ethics must be resisted. This does not mean that we cannot speak generally or ‘help people along’ with guidelines, suggestions etc. (There is no shortage of these in Aristotle’s writings.) Nor does “the judgement is in the perceiving” mean that the judgement is inarticulate or non-conceptual. One can hardly perceive without thinking (‘seeing as’), and the point about judgement, common to Kant and

Aristotle, is again nicely (if unoriginally) summarised by Neiman: “to teach a principle for applying principles would begin an infinite regress, so how do you know when and where to apply that one?” Ethical judgement means conceptualising particular situations in ways that are not always obvious, and the good ethical judge is permanently open to this possibility. Christine, astonishingly, has left her sick husband. Was this an act of courage or cowardice? It looks, perhaps, like an *obvious* example of the latter, but we may need to look more closely. An answer is sought, not necessarily by uncovering facts (perhaps we know them only too well), but by thinking about the meaning of courage/cowardice in relation to this woman, this situation, this act. General and particular are woven together (sometimes unexpectedly or disturbingly), by excellent thinkers, outstanding moral judges who forge a path between dogma and scepticism.

Despite a reverential attitude towards Aristotle, much character education seeks more precision than the nature of the thing admits. It seeks, I am suggesting, greater confidence, more robust knowledge, than it is entitled to. Kristjan Kristjansson (2007) is impatient with the perception metaphor in Aristotle’s ethics, the idea that moral experience has an ‘eye’. He says:

It is as if deciding what to do is a matter of staring at the relevant situation until its unique ‘shape’ jumps out at you. But how do we know whether the shape that jumps out at us is really the correct one and not some kind of perceptual illusion? (p.167)

This is a Cartesian, not an Aristotelian, question. Aristotle’s point about precision is that we *don’t* know, we cannot have quasi- scientific/mathematical knowledge about ethics, and it is a mistake to aspire to this. We do not have yardsticks of the kind that some Enlightenment philosophers (notably Descartes) sought, but this does not mean we should feel desperate or defeated; it means that ethical knowledge is different in kind from scientific/mathematical knowledge. Kristjansson is mistaken when he says that the moral particularist – the person who believes in the eye of moral experience as the source of judgement – finds a yardstick in those Aristotle calls the phronimoi:

We discover [according to the particularist] [which shape is the correct one and not an illusion] by consulting the experienced phronimoi, who will ultimately provide the standards and yardsticks of what is fine and pleasant… If our choice of action would also be theirs in the relevant situation, we know that we are on the right track.[2] (ibid.)

Lacking a general account of what makes an action or person good, the particularist (according to Kristjansson) sees *people* (“experienced phronimoi”) rather than their *qualities or virtues* as “standards and yardsticks”. If we act as they do, or as they would in our circumstances, we “know that we are on the right track.” How, on this view, do we know who the phronimoi are? Well, it is a matter of whether they *strike* us this way, whether the “unique shape” of the phronimos “jumps out at us”. The danger here, as Kristjansson notes, is mindless hero worship, brought about by an

[2] The question of whether the phronimos provides "standards and yardsticks" is a complex one. Aristotle describes the person of 'serious moral stature', as "like a rule and measure of what is beautiful and pleasant" (1113A 33), and it is interesting that Kristjansson dismisses this idea by reference to Plato's Euthyphro. Plato's question is whether the gods love piety because it is pious, or whether piety is pious because the gods love it. The correct answer is the first – piety is objective or real – and it seems clear that Aristotle takes a similar view. It is not that something is good or right *because* the phronimos loves it, or determines that this is so. Rather, we look to the phronimos to help us to *describe* or *specify* what is good – an epistemological rather than metaphysical issue.

inarticulate (non-cognitive, non-conceptual) focus on *people*, and the compelling impressions they make on us. It is suggested that "standards and yardsticks" become available when we think cognitively rather than perceptually, in terms of determinate properties or qualities. We can then *confidently* identify the people in our communities who are worthy of emulation, without using the mythical or impossibly vague moral eye.

This makes our moral lives easier than we might have thought. In particular, it makes *character education* conceptually and practically manageable (something we can manage, pass on to policymakers), for all we have to do is decide which virtues we want children to have, then exemplify them for children to emulate. Whether or not we are virtuous, we know how to display virtue, making it cognitively available, as it were, to children. Since perception is secondary to cognition, we can reasonably encourage children to see us as yardsticks, walking exemplars of the good. We don't have to worry that some might look too wisely or too well, with an astute eye (the eye is not that important) or a suspicion that our characters may not be as flawless as we would like them to believe.

This should make us uneasy. It removes the impossible but unavoidable circularity discussed above, whereby the judgement we seek develops, in part, by judging who we are to learn it from. This circularity raises challenging questions of moral epistemology that are bypassed by those whose primary aim is to secure confidence about the project of character education. There is no space to explore these issues here, but I think Cora Diamond's remark that "the greatest difficulties of ethics are difficulties of description" (1996, P.378) pinpoints this important problem. (Iris Murdoch said something similar.) The 'moral eye' is the accessory of the 'moral/articulate mind' that seeks words (improbable or startling ones, perhaps) that do justice to the matter at hand. This, clearly, is neither scepticism nor dogma; it is, as explored in this paper, an effort to identify the mean of confidence, the precise sphere of good judgement.

I have written, relatedly, about "attitudes at the deepest level", betrayed by behaviour, eye contact, gesture, and more. (Cigman, 2013) Most people (I argued) "talk the talk" of moral equality, but an exclusive focus on the ideological markers of equality can distract us from the subtle condescension that sometimes belies them. This may be betrayed rather than intentionally expressed, rendering the fanfare of equality empty and hypocritical. Respect, care and compassion are important virtues, but the difference between genuine and counterfeit forms (see Gaita, 2002) is crucial. Barely perceptible differences may "mark the *great* difference between helping and harming, respecting and condescending" (Cigman, 2013). This is why the moral eye is important.

This is an inconvenient truth for character educators, people who try to formalise good character and wheel it into schools. One of the reasons it is inconvenient has been touched on: the importance of trust. I said that children need to trust, and we hope that their primary carers are trustworthy. On another level, we hope that they will become wisely trusting adults, and this means they will need to make good, often difficult judgements – something that is learned but not taught. They need to learn to discriminate between trustworthy and untrustworthy individuals, and this may be a vexing challenge for all of us throughout our lives. (Think how hard we sometimes find it to determine who is a good and trustworthy doctor when we or a loved one is ill.) What we should not encourage – I see this as the main danger of character education – is the assumption that authority figures like teachers are trustworthy because their 'good qualities' are on display. Authority figures are easily

identified; phronimoi – genuinely virtuous people – are not, and we should be concerned about systems or ideologies that encourage young people to run these together. We discriminate between trustworthy and untrustworthy people by scrutinising them closely, and a swiftly suppressed glance betraying malice or hatred may be precisely what we need to detect and decipher when trying to judge what a person is really like. Maturity, says Neiman, following Kant, is more about courage than knowledge. We need the courage to look carefully at what we may prefer not to know, people whose subtle condescension or simmering hatred is carefully under wraps. (I'm not suggesting that most of us encounter such people on a daily basis; hopefully we do not.) *We should not succumb to dogma or despair…* We should not, in other words, ease the path to confidence by reducing people to bundles of cognitively determinate qualities; nor should we despair, as Goldie implies, that people are impossible to know and impossible to trust.

5. Closing remarks

Children can be impossible: disruptive, rude, obnoxious. They sometimes cause mayhem and reduce teachers to tears. Of course we need character education, and we need it well before we start worrying about the needs of the economy. We need children to be quiet and attentive, at least some of the time, so they are ready to learn and cooperate with other learners. A reasonable initial aim of character education is the conversion of vice into virtue, but what is complicated is the fact that the vices of childhood do not necessarily evolve into the vices of adulthood, and nor do virtuous children necessarily become virtuous adults. A child may be compliant, obedient, a joy to teach, but her excellence as an immature being will not necessarily translate into the excellence of a mature one: an adult friend, lover, parent or teacher. If character education means conversion – converting naughtiness into compliance, rebelliousness into quiescence – we may congratulate ourselves on the enhancement of children's characters while neglecting the crucial detail.

There may be techniques for converting childish vices into childish virtues, and these may be useful, for there are limits to what parents and teachers should endure. Behaviour needs to be modified in some cases, but what I have emphasised in the paper is that genuine virtue, as opposed to its counterfeit forms, means a great deal more. It is difficult to achieve and will never be achieved unless this difficulty is appreciated. Character education in a rich sense – a sense that leads meaningfully from childhood through adolescence to adulthood – means appreciating what it is to make difficult ethical judgements, visiting but not dwelling in dogma and despair. We will be drawn in both directions, and maturity evolves when we understand this, accept it and work with it. In Aristotelian terms, this enables courage: the mean between under-confidence and over-confidence.

I discussed the Kantian thoughts that courage is more important than knowledge and that difficult ethical judgements are learnt, not taught. This may appear to imply that character education – the teaching of goodness or virtue – is impossible, and we need to tread with care here. I quoted Neiman's remarks about the development of good judgement; you learn by "watching other people", "examples are crucial", good ones as well as bad. By offering good examples to children, communicating freely about the difficulties of discriminating well, we can get children off to a good start. We can enable them to see that ethics is not codifiable, though it is discussible, and generalisations (virtue concepts etc) have an important place. We can help them to develop, or begin to develop, a moral eye. This is teaching, but it needs to be intimate, dialogical and open-

ended. Taught courses, led by teachers who are intent (as I put it earlier) on easing the path to confidence, should concern us.

I want to close with a passage that sheds light on these points. Philosopher Avishai Margalit (2002) writes:

… on many occasions we recognise what is wrong with something without having a clear idea, or any idea at all, about what is right with it. In moral theory… we should refrain from a facile use of the rule of the excluded middle, that is, the belief that just by negating what is wrong we will reach what is right. Right and wrong should be dealt with independently… While dealing independently with the right and the good and with the wrong and the evil, priority should be given to the negative side. Negative politics should take temporal priority in action, if not necessarily priority in preference, over positive politics, since eradicating cruelty and humiliation is more urgent than promoting and creating positive well-being. (p.112-4)

Negative politics should take priority over positive politics… The same is true, I believe, of character education. To reduce if not eliminate violent or disruptive behaviour should be a priority in schools; by and large, we "recognise what is wrong" with this, and we know that it does no good to misbehaving individuals, or their teachers or peers. It does not follow that we have a "clear idea" about what is good or right. *This,* I am suggesting, may be learned but not taught. To identify vice is relatively easy, at least in many cases; to articulate what it means to be virtuous is much less so. This is borne out in homes and classrooms, where children often learn quite easily what they are supposed *not* to do, without necessarily understanding the 'positive behaviour' that is expected to take its place. It may be speculative to suggest that much bad behaviour persists because adults do not understand this either, so their ill-conceived idea of virtue amounts to little more than conformity. Children who will eventually become mature, reflective adults may understand this only too well, and prefer a career of mild delinquency to dull compliance.

The difference between positive and negative may not be as clear-cut as Margalit suggests; one of the mistakes of positive psychology is the assumption that they are antitheses. What is clearly the case, I believe, is that we are *more confident* about what is wrong than about what is right, or rather, we *should* be more confident if we are to steer clear of enhancement dogmas. J. S. Mill was wise to offer a harm principle rather than a benefit principle, and we would be wise to follow by encouraging confidence in recognising what is wrong, without pretending this extends to a positive correlate. I suggest that good character develops when we understand this difference, and accept the difficult, open-ended task of learning to judge what is good and right.

The asymmetries between learning and teaching, negative and positive, point to some fundamental and radically anti-utilitarian conclusions. They are as radical, I believe, as Wittgenstein's rejection of behaviourism in the words:

We talk of processes and states and leave their nature undecided. Sometime perhaps we shall know more about them – we think. But that is just what commits us to a particular way of looking at the matter. For we have a definite concept of what it means to learn to know a process better. (The decisive movement in the conjuring trick has been made, and it was the very one that we thought quite innocent.) – And now the analogy which was to make us understand our thoughts falls to pieces. (1953, paragraph 308)

We have a definite concept of what it means to "make children better", i.e. more virtuous. We think the key to doing this successfully is: measure, intervene, measure, with some philosophical analysis and attention to the ethics and politics of autonomy. I suspect (though some will see this as excessively sceptical) that this is a conjuring trick, which will not in any serious way make children virtuous or good. I think we need a richer mix of 'negative' and 'positive', scientific and 'folk' psychology (the latter found in excellent biographies, novels, and indeed some philosophy), all grounded in the kind of ethical reflection that has been summarily indicated here. In particular, we need to look closely (as Judith Suissa has argued) at the *meanings* of children's unhappiness, despair, and associated misconduct. I would add: their lack of confidence and attempts to compensate for it through various kinds of dogma. But this is a topic for another paper.

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