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Reason and Character

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It is a common assumption in the educational world that the moral development of pupils is integrally tied up with their reasoning ability, and that they should be encouraged from an early age to think critically about matters such as fairness, personal relationships, bullying, racism and even more complex topics such as drugs and sexuality. I do believe that reasoning is an integral element in what, following Aristotle, I will call practical wisdom, and also that reasons can be given for fundamental moral positions, as indeed Aristotle does in his own writings on ethics, though how far reasons can go is a matter to which we will turn. For the relationship between reason or reasoning and morality is not a simple one. It is not one that should lead us to advocate 'critical thinking' in schools, divorced from the formation of character. Nor, despite the authority of Laurence Kohlberg, is it clear that 'mature moral judgement is dependent on a capacity to reason logically; it develops as a child's reasoning ability develops'.(1)

The development of reasoning ability, even to a high degree, may actually go along with an immature attitude to moral judgement. That this should have been apparent from the very beginning of Western philosophy's treatment of these matters is dramatically, if unintentionally illustrated in Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*. Because of the unthinking reverence accorded to the person of Socrates the most striking aspect of this dialogue is commonly overlooked. In it Socrates defeats in argument a young man called Euthyphro, when Euthyphro is on his way to court to get his father prosecuted for negligently allowing a slave to die in rather unpleasant circumstances – at the very least a case of manslaughter, one would have thought. Socrates does his best to show that Euthyphro has no justification for what he is doing, because when Euthyphro attempts to justify what he is doing by saying that he is prosecuting his father out of a sense of piety, he is unable to define the notion of piety in a non circular or question begging way. As it happens, Euthyphro, who is admittedly something of a prig, continues on his way to the court after his Socratic encounter, but he is regarded by most readers of the dialogue to have been worsted in the argument.

But, from my point of view, a crucial aspect of the story is that Socrates shows no interest in the dead slave. So, to someone not blinded by Socrates' reputation and his formidable forensic rhetoric, who is actually more moral, Socrates or Euthyphro? Socrates may have won the argument, but in a human sense, who is more right? Doesn't Euthyphro's father deserve to be called to account? Don't even slaves deserve their day in court, even if posthumously?

Aristotle, Plato's pupil wrote that 'there is a faculty called cleverness; and this is such as to be able to do the things that tend towards the mark we have set before ourselves, and to hit it. Now if the mark be noble, the cleverness is laudable, but if the mark be bad, the cleverness is mere smartness...'? (*Nicomachean Ethics, 1144a 23) Mere* smartness: is that what Socrates is exhibiting in *Euthyphro*? In more recent times, Christopher Hitchens may have demolished Mother Teresa on paper. No doubt in argument Nietzsche could have chewed up Florence Nightingale for breakfast and spat her out , as Lytton Strachey actually did in *Eminent Victorians*, while mentioning Strachey leads me to ask whether I would rather be with him or 'Chinese' Gordon, another of his targets, were I in a tight spot calling for courage, humane understanding and leadership. I know in each case whom I would trust were it to come to knowing the right thing to do, and actually doing it; and it isn't the cleverer, more articulate arguer.

If reason on its own is insufficient to guide morality, what else is needed? Aristotle's answer is in terms of character, specifically in terms of the development of the four cardinal virtues, temperance, courage or fortitude, practical wisdom or prudence, and justice. And these need careful nurturing from the beginning. One hardly needs to be a child psychologist or an early years specialist to know that none of these virtues comes naturally or easily; being a parent or even just a moderately sentient observer of young children should suffice. Each virtue in its own way will involve restraint of other tendencies to which we are all continually tempted: intemperance or unrestrained passion and excess; cowardice or taking the easy way out; the folly to which even the old are susceptible; self centredness and putting oneself first, rather than giving to others what they deserve or are owed. In different guises, each of these virtues appears in all the great moral traditions of the world, whether they be Graeco-Roman (in all their many streams), Hebraic, Christian, Hindu, Confucian, Islamic or indeed any other of which I am aware, including philosophical traditions, such as those stemming from the writings of Hume, Kant, and the utilitarians.

This pretty universal recognition of these and other basic virtues makes it look as if they are somewhat more fundamental to the life of humanity than the specific intellectual and theological contexts in which they are variously embedded and from which they may seem to derive support. Actually the process of support might go the other way round. The theological, philosophical and other machineries of justification may in fact be built on a prior recognition of their importance and validity. In any case where these virtues come from, so to speak, whether they are divinely ordained, or whether they have emerged by a quasi-evolutionary process as societies

develop, need not concern us here. At this point I simply note their prevalence, but also note that they are not instinctive: they require a process of formation in young children (and adults), so as to embed these habits, rather than negative ones to which we, as naturally self-centered as well as other centered, are also prone. What I am interested in in this essay is not the provenance or justification of the basic virtues (which in a sense I am taking for granted), so much as the question as to how they might be imparted and learned.

I would actually go further at this point. These basic virtues are not primarily intellectual and do not depend on intellectual support, however much our reasoning about them may help to refine them and to show just how necessary they may be to the ethical life. Reasoning is also involved in making practical judgements and, once we have them, in refining and developing the moral standards each of us inherits in one way or another; but underlying and supporting any reasoning and refining of our moral practices, the ultimate ends to and for which each of us acts depend on whether or not our basic dispositions of character and desire are initially directed towards good things or base things. The cardinal virtues should then be regarded in the first place as basic dispositions which, if we are good, we bring to other activities, including the intellectual ones of reasoning about morality and behaviour. So, in view of the personal discipline and parental and social support needed in acquiring and sustaining these virtues, to quote Aristotle again, 'it makes not small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather *all* the difference.' (*N Eth, 1103a 33)*

Aristotle goes on to develop the implications of his view in Book X, Ch 9 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. To live temperately and hardily is not pleasant to most people, especially when they are young. But without a character infused with habits of virtue and directed towards what he is unafraid to call 'nobility and goodness', base people will abstain from base acts only through fear of punishment. Those 'living by passion... pursue their own pleasures and the means to them, and avoid the opposite pains, and have not even a conception of what is noble and truly pleasant, since they have never tasted it. What argument would remould such people? It is hard, if not impossible, to remove by argument traits that have long since been incorporated in the character'. (*N Eth 1179b25ff)* Well intentioned people, particularly if of a rationalistic disposition, may find this too hard a saying. Surely, it will be said, there are things you can say to convince immoral or base people of the errors of their ways. In practice, as anyone who has had dealings with aggressive or behaviourally difficult people (e.g. in a school with large numbers of pupils with little or no parental or community support) will know only too well, there often is nothing you can *say* which will bring about the necessary changes; *do*, perhaps, to turn their lives around, as it would be said, but not say, if only because none of this is basically a matter of reason or argument, as opposed to the acquisition of a certain disposition of the soul.

Nor is it as if the difficult, base people are necessarily incapable of understanding arguments. Psychopaths and other people steeped in wickedness are often quite good at arguing, only too able to counter the points made to them, point by point. We hardly need Nietzsche to show us that there is nothing formally irrational or illogical in arguing in favour of immoralism. Plato's Thrasymachus had shown us that long ago, in cleverly and cynically defending the position that justice is what serves the interests of the stronger. Do Socrates or any of his philosophical successors ever satisfactorily answer Thrasymachus, without presupposing that there are occasions where the other has an absolute claim on me, which of course is just what is being questioned?
The situation in logic and reasoning is that any chain of reasoning sooner or later reaches a foundation, and in the moral-ethical case, often sooner rather than later. And whatever turns out to be the rock-bottom can always itself be dialectically challenged. Doing that will hurt him, infringe his basic rights, even kill him; thankfully, good enough for most of us, most of the time – because of the way we have been brought up and have come to live; but, if I am a moral sceptic or some form of political or religious fanatic (fanatic, most of us will say, but perhaps that in itself prejudges the issue), why should any of that worry me, the sceptic or the fanatic, especially if he is standing in my way or in the way of my cause? As Wittgenstein put it, even if in a different context, after reasons come persuasion – and, unless you can appeal to a pre-existing disposition to care about others, or to respect their rights, we are back in the situation Aristotle envisages: 'wickedness perverts us, and causes us to be deceived about the starting points of action. Therefore it is evident that it is impossible to be practically wise without being good.' (*N Eth, 1144b1)* But what Aristotle called the base, Nietzsche or Ayn Rand might have thought of as superior beings.

On the initial acquisition of habits of virtue, Aristotle has this to say: 'Just as the body comes into existence earlier than the soul, so also the unreasoning is prior to that which possesses reason... while passion and will as well as desire are to be found in children even right from birth, reasoning and intelligence come into their possession as they grow older. Therefore the care of the body must begin before the care of the soul, then the training of the appetitive element.' (*Politics, 1334b27-8)* For the training of the body and the appetitive element, he recommends the traditional Greek programme of gymnastic and music, and in particular music which is a

stimulus to virtue and which accustoms them enjoying themselves in the right way (i.e. not for Aristotle music in the Phrygian mode, which makes puts people into intemperate frenzies of excitement, and clearly not the transgressive tide of pop and rap to which our young people are exposed from an early age). And, if gymnastic is to be part of a training of character as well as of the body, I doubt that Aristotle would have had much truck with the unsporting attitudes displayed in most professional sport these days, and which are evident all too often in school sports (though they were not absent from the ancient Olympics either). However, leaving aside the particular details (or prejudices) involved in what an Aristotelian might say about music and gymnastic, what is clear is that from an Aristotelian point of view character must be formed before the child can reason, both because in a child desire, passion and will precede reason and intelligence, but also because character of the right sort is necessary for reasoning of the right sort about what we should do.

Let us assume that character has been formed, and reasoning is setting off on the right track. Is there a continuing role for character as one moves through life, or, in morally good life do reasoning and intelligence take over, as it were, having extricated themselves from their embedding in habit? That we should not think in this way is suggested by the protean nature of reason, that reason can just as well be directed to bad ends as to good, and also by the limitations of reason in providing a foundation for morality. Pascal is much to the point: 'All your enlightenment can bring you only to the point at which you will find neither truth nor goodness...' (*Pensees, section 139, Le Guern edition).* Part of his reason for saying this is his conviction (which he shares with Hume) that reason is no match for a determined scepticism, in either epistemological or moral areas. But he goes on to say that reason on its own, that which distinguishes us from the beasts, may in itself lead us only beastwards, to aiming at and achieving noxious pleasure, depravity and unhappiness. Even if one rejects the claim that depravity is the necessary direction of an unreformed reason, as well as Pascal's own belief in original sin and the way it conditions and constrains all our human efforts, Pascal is surely right to point to the potential reason has to mislead us. It is certainly a useful corrective to any blithe optimism about either our reasoning powers or our intrinsic goodness as human beings. Pascal himself develops a tri-partite division of human faculties into *sens, raison* and *coeur*. Sense and reason are necessary, but suffer from inherent deficiencies, which can be remedied only through the development of *coeur*, heart, which plays the role of what we have been calling character.

Pascal thought that *coeur*, to be rightly directed, had to be animated by divine grace, and also, incidentally, that all human activities are fallible, doomed to failure. He thought that the besetting weakness of humanity was inconstancy, the endless and endlessly fruitless search for diversion, subjection to the servitude of pleasure. He would certainly have warmed to what Michael Oakeshott, a thinker of a very different stripe, said about our being prone to enthralment to 'a ceaseless flow of seductive trivialities'. (2) The temptations to which we are subject do not lessen with age, so the answer to the question about the constancy of character is that, even if we have developed habits of virtue, we must be ever watchful.

Human beings are weak and prone to all sorts of wickedness, even the best of us. One can say this without acceding to Pascal's total pessimism andignoring the real good that people do, or the real goodness in many individuals (but never, of course, unqualified goodness, goodness *sans phrase*). Actually fully acknowledging human weakness and sinfulness – which many of us are reluctant to do for sentimental or romantic reasons – might make us less petty-mindedly censorious when we do see people fall, or their failings are brought publicly to our attention in the media. Be that as it may, as we have already seen, some of those whom Pascal would have called pagans, such as Aristotle, Plato and most Hellenistic and Roman thinkers, were realistic about our potential for baseness, as Aristotle put it. Where the pagans differed from Pascal is that they did see the possibility of moulding character for the good, by good up-bringing in the first place, leading to the inculcation of habits of virtue, and then by subsequent vigilance as life goes on.

Both pagan and Christian thinkers would see character development as essential not just to right judgement and good reasoning about human life in general and morality in particular, but also as liberating, as part indeed of any education which could properly be called liberal in the sense of freeing us from servitude. The servitude in question is servitude to passion and desire and vice of all sorts, including sloth, the countervailing mastery being above all self-mastery. It is easy to see the liberating qualities of each of the cardinal virtues, temperance as freedom from excesses of all sorts and from what drives us to excess, courage as freedom to stick to our goals without being deflected by force inside or out, prudence as freedom from haste and bad judgement, and justice as freedom to enjoy the fruits of genuine community. It is far less easy, of course, to have and exercise these virtues in the face of opposition, temptation and seduction, and all too easy to reason ourselves into acceptance of seduction of one sort and another.

Nor is it the case that possession of a virtuous character guarantees outcomes which will suit us. The gods are capricious, rain and other blessings of nature fall on the unjust as much as on the just (or sometimes, it seems, more so). It is not coincidental that it was the people for whom tragedy was the highest art were also those who articulated most clearly the nature of the cardinal virtues. As demonstrated by 'English Gordon, stepping down sedately into the spears' (3), it is the self-mastery acquired in the possession of those virtues rather than our reasoning ability that might enable us to bear whatever the fates are preparing for us.

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Footnotes

1. This summary of Kohlberg's views is to be found in the highly influential textbook for teachers, *Learning to Teach in the Secondary School*, edited by S.Capel, M.Leask and T.Turner, fifth edition, Routledge, 2009, p 221
2. Michael Oakeshott, 'A Place of Learning' in his *The Voice of Liberal Learning* (edited by Timothy Fuller), Yale University Press, 1989, pp 17-42, p 41.
3. A phrase borrowed from Geoffrey Hill's poem 'The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Peguy'.