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A revitalisation of virtue ethics in contemporary education

Anna DRABAREK*

ABSTRACT

In this article I will discuss employing the classical prescripts of Aristotle's virtue ethics in education as a guide for youth education. For Aristotle, the practice of virtues was not a goal in itself, since virtues are dispositions which may be revealed in various acts reflecting human perfection. Virtues tell us how to act to achieve a particular goal. The ethics of virtue highlights the love of good and perfection. The attitude of a justly proud man consists, among other things, in approving of what is good; at the same time, however, he strives towards self-sufficiency. Self-improvement, which emphasises self-sufficiency, often becomes behaviour that can, unfortunately, generate standoffishness, arrogance, and egotism.

KEYWORDS

virtue; self-improvement; virtue ethics in education

* Ph.D., Maria Grzegorzewska University professor, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Maria Grzegorzewska University, Warsaw, Poland. E-mail: adrabarek@aps.edu.pl.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary philosophers, including Elizabeth Anscombe, Alasdair MacIntyre, Martha Nussbaum, and Sophia Vasalou, have revitalised virtue ethics. I believe this is inspiring and stimulating for an educator. In this article I will analyse the views of MacIntyre, and particularly Nussbaum who shows how the ethics of virtue can be adapted in our times, when we think we are too busy for philosophy to think and reflect on our own and other's behaviour to discern and create the beauty of human existence and contribute to the common good.

From today's viewpoint, it is often said that the principles offered by the ancients, highlighting aretological ethics and contest as a necessary element in striving towards ethical virtue, prove to be unattainable on a mass scale, and thus not very attractive. A desire for being justly proud shrinks in comparison with a desire for being liked by a large group of fans not for heroic deeds but mostly for a cheap replica of nobility by way of fashionable appearances and behaviours, at times conventional, at other times shocking, but always revealing vanity. Peter Sloterdijk (Sloterdijk, 2000) refers to this as a scandal that is a consequence of self-objectification and self-humiliation. The principle of banality, mediocrity, vulgarity, and trivialisation of important matters is becoming more and more widely promoted. Can the Aristotelian *megalopsychos*, who delights in all that is good and praises also the good in other people but who nevertheless remains inaccessible and standoffish in his sublimated virtue, become a role model to be followed by contemporary people (Curzer, 1990; Curzer, 1991)? MacIntyre says that the ancient Aristotelian tradition may be reformulated so that it restores intelligibility and rationality to our moral and social attitudes and choices. He also believes, however, that "traditions do on occasion founder, that is, by their own standards of flourishing and foundering, and an encounter with a rival tradition may in this way provide good reasons either for attempting to reconstitute one's tradition in some radical way or for deserting it" (MacIntyre, 2011: 321).

EQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES IN DEMOCRACY

What about talented people in a world of democratic equality? How are they perceived, treated, and employed by society? Is the equality principle applied to talent and to talented people? In the name of equality, should the talent of talented people be done away with? The acknowledgement of intelligence and talent differences between people is necessary for the sake of development; criticism of those who lag behind by those who are in the lead is necessary. After all, Homer's principle of contest was a source of greatness in ancient

Greece (Nietzsche, 2006: 174–182). Contest also provided foundations for the entire system of Greek education, which helped reconcile individual aspirations and achievements with goals transcending individuals. Coexistence of these motivations in education is still immensely attractive and important. Does this not mean that contest, as a natural way of selecting the best, turns against the democratic equality? Or is the process of competition hypocritically concealed, perhaps, by the rule by the people, of the people, and for the people? Democracy combined with a capitalist management system and the free market creates a morally dubious situation. Modernisation and economic growth require competition among the best, which is often ruthless to weaker and smaller companies, as well as to weak individuals who are left behind in education, and thus out of the labour market.

Does this mean that the best, most talented, and clever should establish a meritocratic elite? Such a spontaneously established elite of the intelligent could be a continuation of the former elite of noble birth. According to Christopher Lasch (Lasch, 1995: 37), meritocracy contributes to a parody of democracy in that it stabilises power by supporting an illusion about one's own infallibility and competence. Can meritocrats also be called justly proud? Let us recall that according to Aristotle, ethical excellence in the actions of a justly proud man appears only when noble deeds are accompanied by noble sentiments. Thus, not only actions, but feelings and the will which accompany them must form an integral whole. For “to be good one must be in a certain state when one does the several acts, i.e., one must do them because of choice and for the sake of the acts themselves” (Aristotle, 1999a: 103).

With this view, the road to ethical excellence requires a special kind of education, since virtue is not natural or innate to man, and thus, to be *arete*, it must become second nature. The primary technique in this educational method is to practice virtue by acting in accordance with its dictates. We become just by acting justly, moderate by practicing moderation, brave by acting bravely. Who we become and who we are because of the education process and training determines not only our actions, but also the way we think about the world, other people, and ourselves. Aristotle believes that the only justification for pride is ethical virtue, which is difficult to achieve and only appears when it is desired as well as experienced as a commitment. It is a desire of being ethically virtuous and of having the virtue for its own sake, but also a commitment to strive for perfection for the sake of the beauty of one's own existence.

Nevertheless, referring to James T. Fetter's reflections (Fetter, 2015), we may identify limitations to the view which disciplines moral actions and choices. A magnanimous person must not have vices, must not show weakness or lassitude in the process of self-improvement, since the person desires honours, which are reserved for gods alone. No one can measure up to this process of self-improvement, as it is anti-egalitarian and intolerant; consequently, it often

becomes a kind of behaviour that may unfortunately generate standoffishness, arrogance, and egotism.

In the age of an “exodus into equality” and so-called “mass individualism”, reflected, for example, in the postulate of equal opportunity, large-scale education cannot identify the most talented and smartest of its students. Who are the meritocrats, then? First,

they settle in “specialised geographical pockets” populated by people like them. These privileged communities — Cambridge, Silicon Valley, Hollywood — become “wondrously resilient” centres of artistic, technical, and promotional enterprise. They represent the epitome of intellectual achievement [...], and of the good life conceived as the exchange of “insights”, “information”, and professional gossip (Lasch, 1995: 43–44).

The various types of elite schools confirm the thesis that democracy has no educational equality. One example is the phenomenon of Swiss high schools: This is education for the children of wealthy corporate elites operating across national borders, since in the global business race, skin colour, ethnic origin or nationality do not play a significant role. This kind of education establishes a network of graduates who belong to influential and powerful groups and families which support one another. This educational offering is very expensive, for example tuition at Le Rosey is nearly three times as high as Harvard University. These schools provide an exclusive setting for aristocratic families and the offspring of global business leaders to meet. The rule is that if you are wealthy enough and come from a suitable family, the school will draw forth and provide form to your excellence. It should also be added that these schools embrace a clear, simple, and rigorous system of discipline which is supposed to reflect ethical norms and develop a sense of responsibility in the students.

In an article about the privileged sons and daughters of the wealthy representatives of the establishment studying abroad, Stephanie Vandrick (Vandrick, 2011: 160–169) points to the emergence of a so-called global identity. When such persons move from one elite school to another around the globe, they develop an identity which allows them to feel comfortable wherever they are. This sense of contentment results from, among other things, financial security and a sense of belonging to the elite.

A characteristic trait is arrogance, however, which is probably not the same as pride in the nobly born. Aristocrats who inherited blue blood were obliged to uphold the reputation and honour of their families. According to Lasch, the best and the smartest are neither knightly nor brave; they do not embrace a code of honour and are not believers in romantic, courtly love. Representatives of this group do not understand, and often do not even see the need for moral improvement, just like hereditary aristocracy did not always realise the need for intellectual improvement.

Although hereditary advantages play an important part in the attainment of professional or managerial status, the new class has to uphold the fiction that its power rests on intelligence alone. Hence it has little sense of ancestral gratitude or of an obligation to live up to responsibilities inherited from the past. It thinks of itself as a self-made elite owing its privileges exclusively to its own efforts (Lasch, 1995: 39).

It may thus be concluded that the aristocracy of the talented has the faults of aristocracy which Aristotle wrote about, without having its virtues since nobility does not oblige. Obligation and responsibility have become depersonalised. This cosmopolitanism of the new elites is not necessarily founded on the ethics of virtue; self-improvement for the sake of one's own existence is expressed, if at all, mostly aesthetically, while disregarding ethics.

VIRTUE ETHICS IN EDUCATION

Though from the distant past, Aristotle's concept of ethics remains close to the contemporary world, as it makes an individual's actions and experiences the primary source of ethical insight. What also makes this kind of moral philosophy useful is that it enables a comparison between alternative concepts, clearly contrasting their characteristic features. That is why I believe Aristotle's virtue ethics is a natural ally to educators, as it is less abstract and schematic than other ethical concepts. Consequently, it helps explain rational, careful reflection on feelings, imagination, and their role. While a learning and education strategy built on the ethics of virtue seems more cautious and sceptical, it is at the same time conducive to creative, original improvisation by both teacher and student.

The aretological current in contemporary ethics may be said to have been rediscovered by Elizabeth Anscombe (Anscombe, 1958), who, while criticizing such concepts as utilitarianism or the ethics of obligation, proposed a return to Aristotle's virtue ethics. The same has also been advocated by many other philosophers, including MacIntyre (MacIntyre, 2011), Julia Annas (Annas, 2007), Robert Audi (Audi, 1993), Michael Slote (Slote, 1997), Nancy Sherman (Sherman, 1989), Nussbaum (Nussbaum, 1988), Rosalind Hursthouse (Hursthouse, 1999), and Sophie Vasalou (Vasalou, 2019). Numerous writings on the subject were first published in the 20th and the 21st century and have since consistently proposed a revitalization of virtue ethics based on Aristotle's idea.

The ethics of value has many interpretations, as the concept designed by the Stagirite inspired by Plato's views has become a point of reference for the development of new strategies of moral improvement. Its influences may be observed both in medieval Christian ethics and in Islam. Aristotle's idea of improvement can also be seen in the thought of René Descartes, David Hume,

Immanuel Kant, or Friedrich Nietzsche (Vasalou, 2019). Even though their concepts may incite controversy, the discussion on the nature of man, a good life, and its relation to the social and natural world which began in antiquity is still ongoing today. The teleological way of viewing good proposed by the Stagirite also becomes a way of substantiating the need for being moral. We learn this kind of argumentation by accepting the natural origin of man, who makes it his goal (in this context understood as good), to achieve a state of nature *in actu*. This activity may contribute to the achievement of *eudaimonia*, which is the fulfilment of man. Today, this postulate is expanded and interpreted, by MacIntyre as well as others, as a comprehensive physical, psychological, and intellectual development of man. He says, for example, that

[a]n Aristotelian theory of the virtues does therefore presuppose a crucial distinction between what any individual at any particular time takes to be good for him and what is really good for him as a man. It is for the sake of achieving this latter good that we practice the virtues and we do so by making choices about means to achieve that end [...]. Such choices demand judgement and the exercise of the virtues requires therefore a capacity to judge and to do the right thing in the right place at the right time in the right way. The exercise of such judgement is not a routinisable application of rules (MacIntyre, 2011: 176).

Ethical virtues, which may be treated as stimulators and stabilizers on the road to becoming a reasonable and happy human being, aid the improvement process. Thus, the ethics of virtue is ethics in action, an applied ethics, an ethics focused on the acting person who should act morally by working on his or her character and testing behaviours. Of course, modern representatives of virtue ethics premise their concepts on various metaethical assumptions; nevertheless, they all agree that the acting person and his or her character are the primary subject matter of analyses and reflections.

In Plato's dialogues Socrates said he was not a teacher of virtue, nor did he consider himself to be one. The only thing he could do was to stimulate thinking like a "gadfly", or to help like a midwife in delivering rational reflection, or self-reflection, in his listeners who entered into a creative, inspiring dialogue with him. Interestingly, as soon as philosophy turns from a dialogue into a monologue, it loses its power to influence. Therefore, the preferred method in philosophical and ethical education, according to ancient and contemporary advocates of virtue ethics, is dialogue between teacher and student to navigate through ignorance about moral problems to be identified, articulated and, if possible, solved. Thus, knowledge and good action depends on the moral condition of the one who performs it, as well as that of the teacher — the guide (Staricoff, 2020).

There are no universal moral principles, however, which would unequivocally and explicitly say how one should act. In each individual case and with

each individual choice the acting subject needs to reflect and display an appropriate moral condition. Both Aristotle and the contemporary supporters of his morality assume one cannot do evil if one is a good person, i.e. displays such ethical virtues as courage, justice, generosity, willingness to help those in need, and has an understanding of what is good. On the other hand, even the most noble principles, if applied by unkind and imprudent people, will not protect us from moral evil. It should be remembered that virtues are important both in the life of an individual and a community, such as a city or a state, since man is first a *zoon politikon*. Thus, moral evil includes taking someone's life, theft, perjury, and treason. On the other hand, virtues recognised by a community would instruct its members on what is praiseworthy and honourable, and what is not only wrong, but also entirely unacceptable to the community (MacIntyre, 2011: 176).

In this context, it is worth referring to the views of Nussbaum (Nussbaum, 2000; Nussbaum, 2001; Nussbaum, 2007; Nussbaum, 2011) who reminds us about reflecting on life as Socrates would, and about the attitude of a reflexive citizen proposed by Aristotle. Like the Stagirite, she believes the sensations of pleasure and suffering affect our moral attitudes, for sometimes doing evil may give us pleasure, and doing good may make us suffer. For this reason, Aristotle says, one should be taught from an early age to enjoy the right things. According to Nussbaum, moral education means informing the ability to feel joy or sadness when they should be felt. This is a very important statement, as it emphasizes the essential role of emotions in upbringing and education. Aristotle attached much weight to childhood as the period when the way we feel is formed. Interestingly, Nussbaum (Nussbaum, 1996) follows Aristotle in stressing that a good orator, as described in his *Rhetoric*, must be able to stir up appropriate emotions in his audience. Applying this to the process of education, a good teacher must also be able to produce appropriate emotions in his or her students. However, in Nussbaum's view of education, which consists in the formation of emotions, should not, unlike Aristotle's position, be used to steer young people. Instead, youth should be taught to recognize their feelings and judge whether they are adequate for the situation.

Nussbaum (Nussbaum, 2011) believes that in education, including moral education, everyone must apply general knowledge to concrete circumstances and their own ability to act. Thus, the essential problem she considers is the question about what actions people are able to perform, and who they can become as a result. Therefore, the problem concerns real potentialities, the abilities present in man. These potentialities may be referred to as capabilities, which are simply qualities resulting from human nature. The author of this concept defines capabilities as the potential faculties of a human being which are inherent to and substantiated by human nature. She uses the Aristotelian categories of "faculty" and "act", where faculties are understood as

powers which may be realized under appropriate influence from the outside, but which also require interaction with this external environment. Nussbaum distinguishes capabilities in terms of their origin and properties. Regarding their origin, she refers firstly to internal capabilities, understood as the faculties of a human subject created by nature, and secondly to so-called combined capabilities, which also result from the nature of the human subject, but are additionally supported by appropriate social, economic, and political conditions (Nussbaum, 2011: 21). As regards the properties of human existence, the author provides an extensive and detailed discussion, listing several abilities. They include the fact of having a life, that is, being able to live a life of normal length in acceptable conditions. Then comes physical health or being able to have good health; to be adequately nourished and have adequate shelter; as well as the ability to reproduce. Yet another is bodily integrity — being able to move freely from place to place, to be secure against violence, but also to engage in a satisfactory sexual life and make reproductive choices.

Further on Nussbaum lists the ability to use the senses, which means being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid pain, as well as the ability to think, imagine, reason, and seek and find truth with the support of properly designed, adequate education. The ability to use thought and imagination may first be understood as creativity and productivity in the various aspects of life which make up culture, including religion, literature, music, and art. The author emphasises the significance of freedom of expression as regards political and religious views. Another all-important issue is the ability to feel appropriate emotions — to have attachments to people and things, to love those who love and care for us, but also to grieve their absence. Nussbaum stresses the need to provide the human subject with the ability to develop emotionally, which may be negatively affected by sadness, depressive states, and fear. She also lists one other, very important, ability based on and stimulated by practical reason. This is the ability to form a concept of good and to engage in critical reflection about one's life choices. This aspect of the capacity for self-interpretation and evaluation of one's own behaviour is additionally enhanced by the ability to live with other people and engage in appropriate interpersonal relations. The author emphasises concern for others and empathy in social interactions, but also stresses dignity in creating these relationships, which should be based on respect for others and self-respect, and eliminating humiliation. Nussbaum believes, however, that respect should not be exclusively anthropocentric, and so we should also be able to live with concern for the world of nature. Two other abilities she analyses are the ability to play, laugh, and enjoy recreational activities, and to have control over one's environment. She pays special attention to the latter, arguing that it may be considered in two aspects: political and material. The ability to control one's environment in the political aspect is a reference to the famous saying by Aristotle who describes man as a *zoon*

politikon. It includes the ability to participate effectively and deliberately in political life, and the consequences. The material aspect, on the other hand, is simply the ability to hold property (both real and movable), and the ability to have property rights on an equal basis with others. This necessarily includes the ability to have freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In this context, Nussbaum also refers to the ability to seek employment, leading to interpersonal relationships based on respect and dignity (Nussbaum, 2011: 33–34).

Nussbaum supplements the capabilities approach with the notion of functioning: an active realisation of one or more capabilities. With this term, she refers to the Aristotelian model of faculties becoming actualised in acts, which requires activation and use of those capabilities present in the faculties. Human activity thus consists in such beings and actions that are the realisation of these capabilities — they may be realised in action, and transform through such action and exercise into virtues, or ethical excellence.

In her other book entitled *Cultivating humanity: A classical defense of reform in liberal education* (Nussbaum, 1997), Nussbaum presents ways of improving the educational process by activating students' potential capabilities. The main goal of this is to form the human being so that he or she is prepared to perform civic roles. She argues that only when people responsibly perform the roles of conscious citizenship may we cultivate our humanity in the modern world. At the same time, she believes that properly organised education should defer to the Socratic model, which places the most emphasis on the ratio. Education should emphasise rational reflection. The study of philosophy, literature, and poetry, which develops students' moral and aesthetic sensitivity, while at the same time carries humanistic values, is very important. The study of poetry and literature, according to Nussbaum, enhances our sensitivity to the experience of ourselves and others (Nussbaum, 1997: 171). To this end, we need dispositions, inclinations which make a person taught to critically reflect on life not likely to indiscriminately follow stereotypes and routine behaviours. Moreover, such a person learns to understand and tolerate diverse ways and conditions of meeting needs and achieving goals shared by all people. Having developed the ability to imagine and empathise, students may put themselves in the shoes of people who are different from them. These dispositions, according to Nussbaum, should be recognized and included in comprehensive education (Nussbaum, 1997: 13).

How should the notion of virtue be understood in the context of the above reflections? Certainly not in the behavioural sense, as virtue is not seen as a set of trained behaviours or mindless, automatic habits. Having virtue in the sense analysed here means aligning “the logic of thoughts” with “the logic of feelings”,¹ which may result in the choice of appropriate behaviour by a student

¹ This concept has been borrowed from Franz Brentano's treatise *The origin of our knowledge of right and wrong* (Brentano, 2009). Referring to the concept of intentionality, Brentano argues

who has received appropriate education. This clearly shows that virtue is a specifically complex dispositive structure which depends on many cognitive and emotional processes. It is made up of both actions and cognitive acts which lead to knowledge about reality expressed as propositions and judgements, all of which may be called most generally “the logic of thoughts”. At the same time, virtue understood in these terms also includes emotions, considered subjective, a kind of stimulation which entails a specific form of expression and produces certain behaviours, while being disciplined by the logic of sensations — the “logic of feelings”. The cognitive aspect of virtue is determined by practical wisdom — *phronesis* as Aristotle called it — first of all with an awareness of results and the means that lead to these ends. The affective aspect of virtue, on the other hand, refers to the appropriate formation of emotions, or “the logic of feelings”. Practical wisdom is deliberative, which means it does not allow for rash or imprudent actions, but only accepts such actions as the result of consideration, self-reflection, reasoning, and examination. It is therefore worth using Aristotle’s virtue ethics as updated by MacIntyre and Nussbaum, as well as others, seeing that this model of conduct (i.e., noble, moral, prudent action) is accompanied by noble feelings. Not only the act itself, but also the feelings and the will that accompany it should form a coherent whole. A virtuous man enjoys his virtue, and consequently performs virtuous acts willingly and happily. Such an attitude is even more desirable in education, as it is linked to the need to supplement knowledge-based competences in teaching particular subjects with the practical wisdom and good character of the educators (Arthur & al., 2017). Naturally, education is based on teacher confidence and consequently becomes a moral endeavour. Therefore, the teacher-leader in education should help students understand what is ethically important, how to make moral choices, and make the right decisions. This education strategy gives students a better chance of becoming more reflective and autonomous.

However, the implementation of virtue ethics in education incites controversy. The main objection to the ethics of virtue is that it is an excellent tool of indoctrinating children and youth (Szutta, 2015: 111–133). Those who criticise moral education based on virtue ethics argue that by referring to ethical virtues in the process of education and developing habits in students which predispose them to act in accordance with virtues, they are forced to adopt some nonobvious truths. The critics say that even before students can think critically, they are regularly submitted to unacceptable manipulation. Also, the

that feelings perceived as intentional acts are either love or hate; they cannot simultaneously contain two opposing intentions. By introducing into his reflections the concept of rightness, he applies it both to judgements and feelings. Thus, a judgement legitimised by rightness is truth, and a right feeling is goodness. The rightness of both judgments and feelings has its source in obvious experiences of consciousness. Consequently, he argues that truth is that which is rightly recognised, and good is that which is rightly loved.

roster of virtues is up for debate, as they vary by culture. As our society becomes increasingly multicultural, there is the risk that children and parents will be forced to accept a moral education in the spirit of values which is culturally alien to them. The proposed model of moral education through the perfecting of ethical virtues can hardly be called indoctrination, however, since it does not consist either in instilling specific moral beliefs without explaining them, or in making the students conditioned to follow them blindly. Having virtues, being based on practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, is a very complex capability which allows one to look for the best action in a particular moral situation. In this approach, there is no room for rigid adherence to universal principles or standards of behaviour. The contextual character of virtue ethics — where the acting subject and the recipient of these actions pay special attention to both the subjective and the objective situation — does not permit indoctrination which could result in producing dependent and non-reflexive, or passive, participants of moral and social life.

Nussbaum's idea of the subject's identity being based on Aristotle's virtue ethics, and the thought experiment of creating an objective basis for our morality without relying on any authority, does incite controversy. Analysis (Beck, 2009: 266–268) shows that it is difficult to identify a theoretically conducted thought experiment that would reveal, confirm, and make our moral obligations entirely absolute. Therefore, Socrates's question about the supreme, absolute value of life, juxtaposed with the question of whether a life of humiliation and constant deprivation of dignity can still be regarded as truly desirable, points to the *aporia* between theory and empirical experience on the moral plane.

CONCLUSIONS

Public life built on humanistic values requires expanding the influence of culture and creating a new model in education. Knowledge and education have now become a guarantee of effectiveness in every sphere of life. Consequently, a person's value is measured by sound theoretical and practical knowledge, as well as a strong, well-formed character based on virtues, erudition, and truth. The concept of value ethics discussed in this article is a realistic ethics, an ethics of moderation, since it does not propose any particular privileged way of judging ethical values. Moreover, ethical codes give way to a realistic approach to reality. It might be said, therefore, that concrete circumstances substantively affect the actual norms of conduct. Such ethics ennobles humans and their roles, and attributes to them moral autonomy in creating rules of conduct. Virtue ethics provides for the right action in each situation in life to be identified by reflecting on one's own behaviour. Therefore, one has the duty to create norms of right conduct by using the existing elements of axiological

knowledge, but first by making use of one's own life experience to foresee as many possible consequences of one's actions as possible. In virtue ethics, the emphasis is on the students' acquisition of moral competences based on moral sensitivity. Aristotle called these competences ethical virtue — arete, reflecting fortitude of spirit, integrity of character, wisdom, and moderation, as well as harmony and inner strength. When employing virtue ethics in education, we must remember, however, that it entails the teacher's responsibility to the students, which is a responsibility of particular significance in the context of truth which is the fundamental category in the process of education. Any half-truths, anti-truths, or post-truths will result in the teacher's failure as educator — once the teacher betrays the trust of his or her students, they can no longer enlighten them.

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