

Virtue ethics and its pedagogic implications

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Received Date: 20 / 10 / 2015

Accepted Date: 31 / 12 / 2015

Abstract

We have started to forget some ancient values such as virtues including courage, self-control, modesty/temperance, benevolence, honesty, and truthfulness, justice in our current lives which have very strong self-interested, and egoistic relationships. Especially because of having different good life conceptions in our daily lives, we try to solve those problems by focusing on common political rules which are generally very abstract. But we have never thought that those rules will not be strong enough to fight against some political and ethical problems because of our selfish and non-altruistic emotions. So virtue ethics which start to become a tradition in the discussions and approaches of ethical philosophy, has been brought important and strong arguments which focus on virtues, social practices, and dependency and those arguments will be different from Kantian and Utilitarian ethics' arguments which are based on abstract moral rules. Even they have very different readings, philosophers like A. MacIntyre, B. Williams, and M. Nussbaum address to our present problems by going back to past, tradition and by this way the virtue ethics tradition has been revived. Now there have been many studies on virtue ethics for our crucial problems such as identity problems, environmental problems, and our interest in other beings, old age, and disease. In this paper, I want to discuss some impacts and values of virtue ethics on education and what kind of tradition it's trying to build within education by making our duty to fight against some contemporary problems cherishing some non-altruistic emotions such as egoism.

Keywords: *Virtue Ethics, Character, Morality, Education*

1. Character, morality and fate

When we need to think about morality and the character involved in it, we should remember one of Heraclitus' amazing passages: "*Ethos antropoi daimon*" (A man's character is his fate) (Williams, 1993: 136).

The first thing we want to draw attention on this passage is that what determines how we will our lives, what we want to reach is our character. The issue which has been addressing in Greek culture and in fact shed light on our present deepest human problems, is that we can gain virtues that determines our character by living with certain familial and communal values. As we are so vulnerable and dependent unlike any animal, and if our mortality, our many vulnerabilities determine our life, ergo our language, our country, our close relations and those powers which we can not control in many respects also determine our character (MacIntyre, 1999: 1-13, 63-81; Williams, 1981: 1-40). So family and community have unavoidably a power on our *daemon* to be good/*eu*. Gaining certain virtues such as courage, generosity, compassion; treating our environment, other people morally sensitive; maintaining our moral responsibility till the end of our lives will be possible by certain social practices and values.

As MacIntyre impressively argued, there is a close relationship between virtue and community; communal entities are more valuable in the construction of the moral self unlike Kantian

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moral theories which emphasize rational autonomous individuality rather than the moral. Virtues cannot be derived from the individual mind, reflection; they are acquired in a certain social life we are members of it, in a certain community including family. We learn how to apply general moral principles in a particular context within communities, so we can fulfill these particularities only by living in complex life forms. Of course, as Blum said, learning the rules of a certain community, gaining certain forms of perception and consciousness, habits of action leave room for individual interpretations. Intrinsic variants and conflicts of morality of the community allows that (Blum, 1998: 163-165).

In fact Aristotle who is a pathfinder for virtue ethics, finds very important that an agent is gaining these virtues in a community starting from childhood with a certain education. He thinks that environmental factors, adults are playing a formative role in the development of the children. When we thought about when this education should start, we can say that it has to start very early, beginning from birth to family. For, as Susan Moller Okin pointed out with reference to William Damon and as Nussbaum discussed in her recent works, moral-emotional reactions are present at birth; the signs of empathy, to recognize the emotional states of others can be observed in infants.

As Aristotle noted, early character development, acquisition of practical wisdom and implementation of it in a given particular context is associated with the close attachment between mother and child. Also within the moral education, traditional stories are playing a key role and MacIntyre specially emphasizes that role. Which story or stories I will be a part of, will determine what I will do (Okin, 1998: 157-158). However only by character education which is the way to gain virtues, it can be solid and secure for someone to aim at some good and apply abstract rules to his/her particular practices. Proceeding safely in our lives through challenging and though conflicts will be possible by virtues we gain in the family, community. Let's look a little closer to this issue with the help of MacIntyre.

2. Reaching to aim with virtue

Aristotle starts to his discussion with these words “every skill, inquiry, action and rational choice (*prohairesis*), is thought to aim at some good (*agathon*); and so the good has been aptly described as that at which everything aims” and he thinks that there are many aims, ends, goods people aim for there are many actions (1094a1) (Aristotle, 2000).¹ Then he questions which of these aims, ends, goods are the most honourable, authoritative, highest for just their own sake not for the sake of something else we want (1094 II). With his theory of virtues he makes us to understand how those different goods altogether related to what we pursue in the well being life/the good life. Clearly this theory searching knowledge of the good, forces us to think how we can reach to our aims rightly by not missing our aims for we can do lots of things to miss them. As MacIntyre expresses, referring to *N.E.*, *orexis* can't follow its objects even if it has taken them as good [*De Anima* 433 a 23-30, 433b7-10, *NE* 1111b12-13].² Especially because of the following reasons, we can make mistakes about our goods:

-“immaturity” For example a young person who doesn't have enough life experience and people who don't have enough maturity of intelligence will make some mistakes about their goods.

¹ Unless indicated otherwise I'll use Crisp's translation.

² I'll use bracketed referense for MacIntyre's referenses.

-“lack of education”. Because of not getting requisite appropriate habits, dispositions and intellectual training [NE 1095b 4-6, 1179b23-29, *Politics* Book VIII) people can’t lead their actions to true *telos*, for their passions distract them and then they will make intellectual mistakes, have intellectual limits for giving reasons about what to do. Especially if an education that varies from *polis* to *polis* couldn’t be successful to follow founded true beliefs about good, or in calculate false beliefs, all of the citizens of the *polis* like Spartians will do badly about attaining *arete*, their good, *eudaimonia* [*Politics*, 1333b11-31]. Then those citizens will seek money, honour which are external by-product as *the* best of some good [*Politics* 1257b40-1258a14; *N.E.* 1095b22-31], and fail to understand the goods’ rank-ordered.

The other problem as a result of lack of education is that some individuals who know what the good is, instead of doing theirs will do things contrary to their goods because of passion-generated impulses. As MacIntyre argues, those individuals who are not vicious (who don’t judge successfully about their goods and do something contrary to their goods) can fail to follow their good since they don’t control their passions rationally; in other words they are incontinent, *acratia* kind of person. Clearly there is also another different kind of person who doesn’t have problems regarding *acrasia*, for he/she can control his/her passions and we must show his/her difference from virtuous people. This person whom MacIntyre called *enkratic* is actually very similar to rational, virtuous person. He has same pleasures and pains like virtuous people, does what they do, even does these things by judging and acting rightly contrary to his passions even if his character doesn’t sufficiently have *prohairesis*, rational desire like virtuos people [NE 1111b14-15]. But there is a big difference between them regarding that *enkratic* person doesn’t have same motivations and his passions have not been fully transformed like virtuous person. So “in the transition from immaturity to rationality the conditions of *acratia* and of the *enkratic* represent moments of incomplete development”. All these humans including the young and mature ones who have never developed intelligence, will make some mistakes, show various types of failure about their *eudaimonia* for they don’t have well founded true beliefs about goods. They cannot be practically rational without being virtuous, more particularly just, and they get those beliefs in *polis*. Especially people who earn first major premise of a practical syllogism, individual judgement in form of *abre gerundive* “should be done by me”, the set of ultimate first principles and concepts in *polis* will develop their perception, character, intelligence to complete this derivative which is the central task of deliberation (maybe till their death). If those people can be successful in achieving these chain of derivatives, they will have genuine good.

Now we can say with the help of MacIntyre’s arguments, Aristotle’s virtue theory tries to make our human life more rational by discussing varieties of errors and disagreements, paying attention to human nature, different arguments, philosophical attitudes; (MacIntyre, 1988: 126-145) namely not forgetting our animality, including the achievements and limitations of his predecessors, value of his cultural *phainomena*.¹ Aristotle who finds the emotional part of the life important, more precisely substantial, thinks about cultivating desire (*orexis*) in the ways that will be compatible with reason.

Again, pleasure has grown up with all of us since infancy and is consequently a feeling difficult eradicate, ingrained as it is in our lives. And to a greater or lesser extent, we regulate our actions by pleasure and pain. Our whole inquiry, then must

¹ See Nussbaum, M. (2001), *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

be concerned with them, because whether we feel enjoyment and pain in a good or bad way has great influence on our actions (*NE* 1105a1-6, I.III).

Obviously, a human being is not only an emotional being but he is also a rational one, and this differentiate him from other beings. So human beings who have both *orexis*/animality and *logos*/divinity will lead to a human life which will fulfill their *ergon*. They will live the life based on *logos* which is the distinctive faculty of their soul (*psuche*). The rational part of the *psuche* is defined by possessing *logos* and it is interested in intellectual (*dianoetikes*) virtues or excellences (*arete*) such as *phronesis*, *techne*, *nous*, *episteme*, *sophia* (Dunne, 1999: 55). However human *psuche* also possesses a non-rational part in addition to this rational part, and this non-rational part is the seat of appetite, desire and moved by pleasure and pain relating to virtue of character (*ethikes*). On the other hand *psuche* which has these different parts has also divided into other parts: rational part of *psuche* has the face of practical and theoretical part and non-rational part of *psuche* which gets receptive, obedient to the rational part contains the vegetative, nutritive part which is the cause of nutrition and growth, and desiderative part (*NE*. 1102a27-1102b). In this division of *psuche*, nutritive part is certainly not interested in virtue, plays no role in human nature since it “exists in everything that takes in nutrition, even embryo” so this part won’t be specific to human beings. But desiderative part can partake in *logos*, can be directed rightly with reason; but it will conflict with *logos* (*NE*. 1102a27-1102). Thus Aristotle thinks human beings have to earn some habits such as temperance, generosity with experience and time for these don’t arise in us by nature, so we have to exercise them from childhood in order to make desiderative part of *psuche* follows rational part (*NE* 1102a27-1103a12, I. 13). If we state with Aristotle’s words; “...we become builders by building, and lyre-players by playing the lyre. So we become just by doing just actions, temperate by temperate actions and courageous by courageous actions.” (*NE* 1103a35-1103b 2). How we are to be, to be good or bad depends on our learning or teaching them as good or bad; namely the origin and means of the good or bad development of each virtue are not different but same. As a result, virtues make a human being good or bad. In this regard after all those explanations Aristotle won’t hesitate to say that:

... it is not important how we are habituated from our early days; indeed, it makes a huge difference-or rather all the difference (*NE* 1103b20-25).

It is for his reason that we need to have been brought up in a particular way from our early days, as Plato says, so we might find enjoyment or pain in the right things; for the right education is just this (*NE* 1104b11-14).

At this point, we immediately recall two important elements to understand Aristotle’s explanations on virtue which prevent us to misunderstand them. Firstly, virtue of character is concerned with finding means between two excesses in feelings and actions for Aristotle. If we behave according to means, hit a mean in our feelings and actions, we don’t miss the mark, target, aim. Secondly, to be virtuous we must choose, decide rationally (*prohairesis/orektikos nous/orexis dianoetike*) which is determined by reason to hit a mean because we have to know and have perception (*aisthesis*) about how to apply them at right time, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end, in the right way, in the situation that a mean is relative to us [*NE* 1106b15-20 Book II, 6] (MacIntyre, 1988: 136). “Virtue, then, is a state [*hexis*] involving rational choice [*prohairesis*] consisting in a mean relative to us and determined by reason – the reason, that is, by reference to which practically wise person [*phronimos*] would determine it... virtue both attains and chooses the mean.” (*NE* 1106b34-1107a6, Book II, 6). So character/ethical virtue

and *phronesis* are necessary to virtues; we can't understand practical rationality without the virtues of character, the virtues of character without practical rationality. "It is not possible to be fully good without having practical wisdom, nor practically wise without having excellence of character." (NE 1144b31-2) (Sherman, 1989: 5) Virtues we earn from communal practises, which are constitutive of the ultimate universal of living well (*eu zen*), make *phronesis* right while *phronesis* helps us to decide them in the variety of situations [NE 1144a20, 1144a7-8, 1144a8-9]. Then what we will keep in mind is that even if general rules, habits, customs, communal goods give us eyes to see around us, we can't follow those general things with just customs namely without our individual practical thinking. Sometimes general rules can not be helpful for us to know what to do when we face new situations which we can't take under general rules.

3. Not missing to aim with virtuous education

Actually, as Crisp said, Socrates' question which we encountered in Antiquity, "How should one live?" replaced by "How should I act?" question with the transformation of society, for example with the presence of Judaeo-Christian tradition and with two dominant moral teachings of Kantianism and Utilitarianism (Crisp, 1998): 1). The answer to this question is given within the limits of responsibility. As a result, the morality has emerged as a principal similar to law that determines which actions we can or can not actualize. For example, Kant and Kantian deontological tradition thinks about the right action with moral "law", as well Utilitarianism thinks about it with the greatest good action has led (Crisp, 1998: 4; Hursthouse, 2000: 18-19). These two modern morality traditions have tried to identify on which moral foundation an agent gives moral decisions. However rules won't be enough to address to the complexity of human life and to its unpredictability, and some dilemmas (Crisp, 1998): 1-4). Hence the tradition of virtue ethics, with taking account of these complex situations, has addressed to the circumstances of an agent on the basis of virtue and practical wisdom.

Obviously today, when we think of many of our problems, it is important to associate virtue ethics with the curriculum of education. For in the face of problems such as environmental issues, our behavior to other beings, hunger, poverty, discrimination virtue ethics will pay attention to the complex and contextual thing, deal with the association of feelings and reason via virtues and by doing that it will play a constructive role for our problems. In particular, especially due to economic problems, when we consider the situations where our political and social conflicts expand, understanding each other will only be possible by virtues such as moderation, generosity, sacrifice. In cases where greed, self-indulgence, short-sightedness, arrogance, cruelty, vanity couldn't be transformed, rules may not be sufficient. For example, as Hursthouse stresses about the debates of virtue ethics perspective on environment, by breaking radically with tradition, it will be possible for us to have lasting sensitivity regarding the environment with old and familiar virtues and with chances of new virtues. Hursthouse's following statements are important:

It can be seen that defending the green belief in terms of the old virtues and vices involves a particular strategy. Each old virtue or vice mentioned is considered in the context of the new area of our relations with nature, and thereby acquires a new application or dimension. I have briefly alluded to the old virtues of prudence, practical wisdom, compassion, and proper humility, and the old vices of greed, self-indulgence, short-sightedness, cruelty, pride, vanity, dishonesty, and arrogance. We acquire a new perception, or understanding, of what is involved in being compassionate, or greedy or short-sighted or properly humble or arrogant; some of the old virtues and vices get reconfigured. And, we might well say, from the virtue ethics

standpoint, this has been a standard strategy for ethical advance (Hursthouse, 2007: 158).

Frankly, as Hursthouse implied, old, familiar and some new potential virtues has been handled by philosophers and thinkers like Aldo Leopold, Arne Naess, Paul W. Taylor, Holmes Rolston within today's environmental problems. But change in our lives which these philosophers emphasize, require a radical change in our actions, emotions, perception, sensibility, understanding. This change which cannot be achieved just by reading philosophy books, will be possible by virtues which have real respect to nature (Hursthouse, R. (2007): 160-164). To turn to virtuous action, learning to be honest, kinder, brave will develop our understanding about them (Annas, 2011: 36-39).¹

For as Sherman and Nussbaum discussed by referring to Aristotle, emotions including pleasure and pain which has been discussed in virtue of character as a mode of discriminating, registering particulars in Aristotle, have cognitive components and a relation to specific evaluations, beliefs (Sherman, 1989; Nussbaum, 2001). So if we really want to cultivate "solidarity" in order to deal with some universal problem, we should not only focus on the abstract rules without touching emotions but we have to focus on the ways of extending emotions from our family, neighbour to universe in relation to reason. So we must think education and its curriculum again in this perspective, (namely focusing on some virtues, relations, reason and emotions) if we want to pursue a more acceptable life in cosmopolit relations, and to find reasonable solutions to the question of "how we should live?". In this manner Nussbaum is right to write those;

As Heraclitus said 2.500 years ago, 'Learning about many things does not produce understanding.' Marcus Aurelius insisted that to become world citizens we must not have simply a mass knowledge; we must also cultivate in ourselves a capacity for sympathetic imagination that will enable us to comprehend the motives and choices of people different from ourselves, seeing them not as forbiddingly alien and other, but as sharing many problems and possibilities with us. Differences of religion, gender, race, class, and national origin market the task of understanding harder, since these differences shape not only the practical choices people face but also their 'insides', their desires, thoughts, and ways of looking at the world (Nussbaum, 2003: 85).

4. Conclusion

In this brief discussion on the relation of virtue ethics and education, primarily we can't throw aside that we have certain dependencies and shape our lives within these dependencies. We are subject to feelings together without rationality. Thus an education which doesn't pay attention to emotions, contextual commitments, only insists on transferring certain fixed rules, moreover depends on the market's instrumental logic won't be functional for today's problems. Unless making old, familiar and functional virtues functional again and in this way dealing with political life, it will be inevitable to miss the aim, show many weaknesses and conformist approaches. Now we need to think about education together with virtues. Our discussion on applying a curriculum of education which is sensitive to character education that doesn't turn its back on to the problems of the world, pay attention to local in our lives where problems has grown day by day, is vital.

¹. Of course, this learning is not simply imitating teachers, a detailed discussion about this see Sherman and Annas.

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