

'Raising' children: A character-based approach to residential child care

Dr June Jones
Senior Lecturer in Biomedical Ethics
University of Birmingham

Introduction

Traditionally, we tend to think about ethical behaviour as that which concerns our actions towards others. Training children and young adults to behave ethically is a notoriously difficult endeavour, partly because we are not living their life, we are observing it from an outside perspective. People choose to behave in a variety of ways, not all of them exemplary. A different way to approach ethics is to consider what sort of people we ought to be. If we develop character traits that are beneficial to ourselves and others, we find that individual actions will tend towards ethically decent behaviour. This paper will explore a character-based approach to residential child care, where the aim is to develop a child's character so that right action will flow more readily than focusing on the rights and wrongs of individual acts. The aim is not to prescribe a set character that children ought to aim for, but examine how moral character develops and how those with responsibility for the child can aid the developmental process.

The role of character

Aristotle discusses the importance of moral character by linking it to the concept of flourishing, translated from Eudemonia. Eudemonia is related to how best society flourishes, where individuals within a society contribute to flourishing for all, rather than selfishly seeking their own flourishing at the expense of others. Aristotle believes that in order to flourish, we must develop 'virtues' such as wisdom, justice, courage, temperance (Barnes and Thomson, 2002). Wisdom is a capacity for knowledge mixed with the predisposition to use that knowledge rightly and with experience. Wisdom comes with age and life experience; we do not tend to think a five year-old being wise, though they may be clever. Justice is the capacity to act so that everyone in society can flourish. Courage involves making the right moral decision and right moral choices and facing the consequences. Temperance involves self-control, making choices about how we live our lives and how we respond to the things that tempt us.

For Aristotle, virtues are a disposition to act, feel and judge in accordance with right reasoning, where emotions, thoughts, feelings, experience and rationality to combine to assist in the development of our character. He divides virtues into two types. Intellectual virtues are those that can be learnt in an academic sense through study, such as educational wisdom that affects the practical realm.

Moral virtues are those which cannot be learnt in an academic sense; they can only be practiced by learning from the examples of role models. An example here would be learning how to say 'no' to an activity that was harmful but attractive due to peer pressure. A lecture on 'saying no' might be ineffective, but seeing a role model refuse to bow to peer pressure and being able to discuss the challenges they face and how they deal with them provides a real opportunity to develop moral character, not just an opportunity to 'say no'.

It follows that for Aristotle, learning the moral virtues requires having good role-models and experienced tutors, who are available from early childhood and continue throughout adolescence and into adulthood. Character development continues throughout life, it does not reach a point of fulfilment once we become an adult. Aristotle claims that 'we ought to have been brought up in a particular way from our very youth so as both to delight in and be pained by the things that we ought, for this is right education' (Barnes and Thomson, 2004, [Nicomachean Ethics], 1104b, 9-14). The theme of 'right education' is closely linked to character formation in Aristotle's work, rather than the modern notion of academic development. He clearly did recognise the role of academic development but not at the expense of character development, which ought to start much earlier and remain the focus. He continues later to state that

The soul of the student must first have been cultivated by means of habit for noble joy and noble hatred. For he who lives as passion directs will not bear argument that dissuades him, nor understand it if he does...but it is difficult to get from youth up a right training for excellence if one has not been brought up under right laws. (Barnes and Thomson, 2004, [Nicomachean Ethics], 1179b 20-1180a 5)

Here he is dealing with the role of character development in terms of taming the passions that hinder children and adolescents from rational persuasion. He believes state legislation has a role to play here, for if the state does not legislate for moral development, children cannot be to blame when their character remains under-developed.

Moral training: 'Raising' children

Sarah Broadie has used Aristotle's arguments to consider the aim of moral training and the role of parental obligations. She claims that moral training is not only a matter of curbing non-rational impulses, but also involves the need to cultivate interest in more distant objects. Children tend to be focused on immediate gains and benefits, but in helping children to value what may be in the future we are helping to develop in them a right sense of priorities (Broadie, 1994). For instance, children who like sweets may struggle to resist the temptation to avoid eating them before a meal. By encouraging the child to wait until after the meal, we are training them in self-discipline and prioritisation.

Whilst this is a simple example, for older children, saving pocket money for something they want in the future might be a more appropriate example which achieves the same aims. A further stage in moral training occurs when we encourage children to do what they are supposed to do, not merely what they want to do (Broadie, 1994). The aim of this type of moral training is to help children and adolescents to understand that things which are worth aiming for are sometimes not immediately pleasant. Revising for exams might be relevant here, where immediate and pleasant distractions inhibit the overall aim of getting good grades to access further educational or career opportunities.

Broadie believes that some of the key parental obligations involve teaching a child to know and care about its own welfare and teaching it to respect the rights and interests of others. As children are more likely to draw lessons from behaviour they see around them rather than instructions they receive, she believes that parental character development is vital (Broadie, 1994). Children who are exposed to parents and authority figures who are poor role-models have a limited range of options in how to develop their moral character, which is likely to be more harmful for them than for an adult who has already had the opportunity to develop their moral character.

The less ethical attention a child receives the less likely he or she is to be aware that behaviour forms character. Ethical feedback is vital to character development, so the success of character development depends on those with parental/educational authority prioritising the provision of ethical feedback for children. Feedback involves not just saying that something is wrong, but working through with the child why it is wrong, in what sense it is wrong, and helping to develop strategies of understanding and insight that will enable the child to avoid acting in a similar way in the future. She claims that the key task for educators (moral as well as academic) is to 'raise' children from their 'first nature', which is primarily selfish, by not giving in to their every physical impulse and by encouraging children to value things without being driven by the immediate need to have them. The sense here is that of literally raising a child out of its childish nature into a higher nature that is growing in maturity. She claims that 'the way to teach him not to be tempted by what would be wrong to have is to get him to feel that he should not even mind not having it.' (Broadie, 1994, p.74) This clearly cuts across the way that peer pressure works, where children and adolescents do mind not having what everyone else seems to have, and sometimes act in ways they later regret in order to get the object of their desire.

The role of shame

An aspect of 'raising' children that has decreased in popularity is that of developing a sense of shame. Shame has become associated with abuse, and

in this respect has regrettably been the cause of further harm to children who have already suffered much. Abusers have cultivated a sense of shame in their victims to inhibit children seeking help, suggesting that the abuse was somehow the child's fault and worthy of punishment if discovered. This is not the sort of shame that moral character development seeks to foster. In an Aristotelian sense, shame is useful in that it helps us develop modesty, which covers all aspects of life. Aristotle describes how character development proceeds without a sense of shame.

For the shameless man is he who says and does anything on any occasion or before any people; but the bashful man is the opposite of this, who is afraid to say or do anything before anybody (for such a man is incapacitated for action, who is bashful about everything); but modesty and the modest man are a mean between these. For he will not say and do anything under any circumstances, like the shameless man, nor, like the bashful man be afraid on every occasion and under all circumstances, but will say and do what he ought, where he ought, and when he ought. (Barnes, 1984, [Magna Moralia], 1193a 2-10)

Salkever argues that the special work of the family is neither procreation nor security but the development in children of the sense of shame that is an indispensable pre-condition for deliberate and thoughtful living (Salkever, 1990). He believes that cultivating a sense of shame in children prepares them for public life, where they can make a useful contribution if they have learnt modesty and allow shame to guide them away from behaviours and conversations that they would later regret. People who are not capable of being ashamed are not open to persuasion or deliberation. If they behave circumspectly, it is primarily out of a fear of punishment. The sense of shame that Salkever believes Aristotle is discussing is the habitual disposition to be concerned that one's initial reaction to a situation might be wrong (Salkever, 1990). Modesty creates a sense of carefulness and hesitancy about moral deliberation. If this is not deliberately cultivated in children and adolescents they are unlikely to arrive at this characteristic unaided.

Residential child care

The role of residential child care in helping to form a child's moral character is crucial. We live in a state where educational provision fails to address moral training at a character level. It merely provides for children to be taught about which acts to avoid, often based on avoiding harm to self or others. Moral training needs to go far beyond that. Children need to be surrounded by good role models, who can discuss with them in practical ways the challenges that both role model and child have and continue to face. Together they can cultivate insight, understanding and habits that will allow the child to develop into a person who can flourish in society, and help society flourish. Helping a

child develop a sense of right and wrong involves fostering care of themselves and others. As a sense of shame will be helpful to children in developing characteristics that are primarily orientated towards being thoughtful, insightful and reflective in moral deliberations, it is vital that children have role models that they can trust and respect. A further essential aspect in developing character is accessing opportunities where moral choices can be made. Residential care facilities need to foster such opportunities, with the appropriate level of support, so that children can exercise choices in an environment where real responsibility and consequences exist. Purchasers of residential child care need to consider whether the packages they consider suitable have made provision for character development, assessing what opportunities exist and how these are to be utilised with children from diverse backgrounds.

Challenges

One troubling aspect of character development is the reliance on role models. If a flourishing society is dependent on having good role models to train the next generation, how can we ensure that the role models are good, or have an appropriate standard, in the first place? This is in some sense an insoluble problem. We can go some way to deal with it by laying down the idea that we ought to aim for a perfect society. That is beyond the most dedicated of politicians and sociologists. What we can aim for is some agreement over the types of character traits that tend towards society being a good place in which to live for the majority. If we can agree that selfishness, whilst providing immediate personal gains, usually leads to long-term suffering for self and others, we can look towards characteristics that steer away from selfishness and towards appropriate levels of care for self and others. Having a general level of agreement about the types of virtues that Aristotle lists (virtues like courage and justice: there is a more comprehensive list, with explanations, throughout book 2-5 of *Nicomachean Ethics*) may allow a framework to be developed that can guide character development in children and adolescents, and may provide an opportunity for residential child care practitioners to reflect on their own ethical behaviour too.

Conclusion

In this paper I have outlined an Aristotelian approach to character development, and the role residential child care can play in providing opportunities for this to take place. Ultimately, focusing in a positive way on character development will create children who mature into adults who are able to play a full role in society, and enrich society through their contribution. 'Raising' children in a residential child care setting provides a number of additional challenges to that of a nuclear family. These challenges can prove to be turning points in young people's lives, where they can have their characters developed, as well as their minds and bodies.



(An earlier version of this paper was delivered to the Child Care History Network conference in Cheltenham, November 2009.)

References

Barnes, J. (Ed.) (1984). *The complete works of Aristotle: Magna Moralia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Barnes, J. & Thomson, J.A.K. (Eds.) (2004). *Nicomachean Ethics [Aristotle]*. London: Penguin Classics.

Broadie, S. (1994). *Ethics with Aristotle*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Salkever, S. (1990). *Finding the Mean: theory and practice in Aristotelian political philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

