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The Theory and Practice of Virtue Education
Edited by Tom Harrison and David I. Walker*

The collection of essays by different academics expresses a wide range of nuanced views on virtue ethics. Divided into three main parts, part one provides depth and breadth in introducing the history and philosophy of virtue education. Part two explores teaching applications. The third part focuses on virtue education’s bearing on friendship, patriotism, gratitude, and courage. The book’s audience includes readers interested in Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, moral theologians and ethicists, and educators. The latter benefit from the fine balance among philosophical underpinnings, teaching practice, and the four applied areas.

Part One

David Carr in the opening essay provides an overview of ancient Greek teaching on the ethical life. He highlights “the Socratic emphasis on honest perception of ourselves and others . . . [as] a *necessary* condi-

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tion of moral virtue.”¹ He nevertheless criticizes Socrates’ and Plato’s abstract, overly-intellectual approach which downplayed a more down-to-earth vision. More specifically, neither philosopher addressed “the appetitive, sentimental and affective dimensions of human association” or family ties.² As with the book’s other essayists, Carr never shies away from using Greek terms such as *phronesis*, *techne*, or *episteme*. He contrasts Aristotle’s teaching on virtues with the Socratic-Platonic model, noting how Aristotle based *phronesis* on the “doctrine of the mean.” This led the Stagirite to address human appetites and behavior much more practically than either Socrates or Plato.

As a collection of papers given at an academic conference, one chapter in *The Theory and Practice of Virtue Education* does not necessarily pick up where the previous one left off. Yet the three essays after Carr’s do share many commonalities. The book’s second essay, Howard Curzer’s “Healing character flaws,” mixes theory with practicality. His examination of moral development connects with Christopher Gill’s chapter on Stoic virtues and John Hacker-Wright’s paper that discusses more directly St. Thomas’s teaching.³ All three essays highlight moral development. Readers get a clear sense of virtue, vice, and even brutishness, and how humans can achieve the first and avoid the latter two.

The authors provide specifics for the development of the virtues. Hacker-Wright notes: “Genuine moral growth depends on the ability to change one’s view of the good, and this requires change in both the rational and non-rational aspects of the soul, both of which are involved

¹ David Carr, “Ancient roads to knowledge of virtue: The Greek philosophical legacy,” in *The Theory and Practice of Virtue Education*, 13, author’s italics.

² *Ibid.*

³ See Christopher Gill, “Stoicism today: An alternative approach to cultivating the virtues,” in *The Theory and Practice of Virtue Education*, Chapter 4; and John Hacker-Wright, “Moral growth: A Thomistic account,” in *The Theory and Practice of Virtue Education*, Chapter 3.

in our practical, cognitive grasp of the world.”⁴ Typical of other authors of *The Theory and Practice of Virtue Education*, Hacker-Wright connects the theoretical to the practical. He also discusses Aquinas’s teaching on *habitus*, which is a word much richer than the English “habit,” entailing “knowledge, skills, and virtues.”⁵ Such discussions ready the audience for the more practical second part.

Part one’s essays, which also include “Akrasia as a character trait” by Paulien Snellen and Nancy E. Snow’s “From ‘ordinary’ virtue to Aristotelian virtue,” focus almost solely on the philosophical underpinnings of virtue. They tend to avoid venturing into how these impact teaching. A chapter on philosophy of education from an Aristotelian or Thomistic vantage would have rounded out these essays.

Part Two

Entitled “Theoretical and practical approaches for educating the virtues,” part two includes author classroom experience, which is both helpful and somewhat tedious. The first chapter, Mark E. Jonas’s “Plato on dialogue as a method for cultivating the virtues,” is in fact quite theoretical, highlighting similarities with Aristotle’s teachings. Both philosophers were pessimistic regarding the ability of a badly brought-up individual to achieve a virtuous life or the ability of words alone to effect personal moral change. Plato taught that “true virtue comes only when one’s habituated emotions are in line with reason,”⁶ (92), Jonas observes. This places serious demands on education.

Gillian R. Rosenberg’s introduction to character education continues this emphasis on reason’s importance in virtue development. She

⁴ Hacker-Wright, “Moral growth,” 33.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶ Mark E. Jonas, “Plato on dialogue as a method for cultivating the virtues,” in *The Theory and Practice of Virtue Education*, 92.

writes, “character education utilizes instruction and training to cultivate and habituate virtues, and to infuse natural passions, inclinations, and feelings with reason.”⁷ She connects this to Piaget’s “innate predisposition” we have for knowing right from wrong.⁸

Perhaps David McPherson’s “Manners and the moral life” would be better placed under part three, given the paper’s specific focus. McPherson argues convincingly for the importance of manners in the moral life. They demonstrate the respect for others that so much of virtuous living entails. His mixing of Confucius and Aristotle not only highlights inter-cultural commonalities but also shows the universal nature and importance of manners. Just as “*dignified things* require *respectful manners*” so sacred things “require certain *reverent manners*.”⁹ Manners possess not only ethical importance, but spiritual as well because they “*ennoble our animal nature*.”¹⁰

Perhaps more than any other essay in the first two parts, McPherson’s readers get a sense of what our current society is lacking and why this is significant. Teachers and others in authority will benefit from this reasoned defense of manners. McPherson reminds us that good manners tie in with Aristotle’s observation that “we become virtuous by repeatedly doing virtuous actions.”¹¹ The convincing, highly relevant argument makes this paper the book’s highlight, motivating non-committed readers to look more deeply into virtue education.

⁷ Gillian R. Rosenberg, “Moral agency as teaching morally and teaching morality: A practical approach to moral education,” in *The Theory and Practice of Virtue Education*, 112.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ David McPherson, “Manners and the moral life,” in *The Theory and Practice of Virtue Education*, 145, author’s italics.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 146, author’s italics.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

Part Three

Entitled “Educating specific virtues,” part three starts off with R. Curren and C. Dorn’s essay on patriotic virtue¹² before the next essay’s topic on friendship. Authors B. Fowers and A. Anderson note the importance of friendship for Aristotle. They observe, “there are three important ways that Aristotle’s way of thinking about friendships is quite foreign to us moderns.”¹³ As with the essay on manners, this discussion will leave the audience lamenting the beautiful things that our hedonistic, fast-paced society has left behind. Instrumentalism and hyper-individualism have not been good to friendship. This essay leaves readers with a strong sense of friendship and why it is so vital to the virtuous life. In striking contrast to instrumentalist friendship, virtue friendship is based on “the friends’ admiration for one another’s goodness or excellence. It is the good they see in one another that brings and holds the friends together.”¹⁴ This type of friendship reinforces the virtues, in other words. As with many of the book’s other papers, the ancients seem to hold up pretty well in comparison to what today passes as acceptable behavior.

Overall, C. Vogler in “Courage in the classroom” keenly sums up the aims and contents of *The Theory and Practice of Virtue Education*:

A virtue brings the full and appropriate actualization of a human power—one that allows for both the upward inclination of passions and appetite toward reason and the downward governance

¹² See Randall Curren and Charles Dorn’s “The nature and nurture of patriotic virtue.”

¹³ Blaine J. Fowers, Austen R. Anderson, “Aristotelian philia, contemporary friendship, and some resources for studying close relationships,” in *The Theory and Practice of Virtue Education*, 184.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 189.

of passion and appetite by reason actualized in overall pursuit of the good.¹⁵

Vogler also points out the traditional Aristotelian-Thomistic view on the interrelationship or intertwining of the virtues whereby “you can’t have one virtue unless you have all of them.”¹⁶ Perhaps a separate essay on the holistic aspect of the virtues and how this leads to a holistic view of education would have rounded out the discussion. As it is, the holistic attributes of both of these is alluded to only in piecemeal fashion.

Conclusion

All in all, readers will come away understanding the multifaceted nature of virtue education. It is never only theoretical, yet its practical applications do rest on important philosophical and even metaphysical foundations. These latter are almost never stated explicitly, perhaps another small lacuna. *The Theory and Practice of Virtue Education* remains nevertheless an inspiring book.



REFERENCES

The Theory and Practice of Virtue Education, edited by Tom Harrison and David I. Walker. London: Routledge, 2018.

¹⁵ Candace Vogler, “Courage in the classroom,” in *The Theory and Practice of Virtue Education*, 212.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*