

**Can Moral Character Be Taught?**  
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It's plain that good moral character in the members of a profession such as the military is crucial. Developing good moral character is critical for at least two reasons. First, the military, to an extent greater than any other profession, finds moral virtue to be a functional necessity. That is to say that the military may well be unable to perform its function of defense if its members are of weak character, primarily due to the cohesion required among military members in the carrying-out of sometimes hazardous duties. And, more importantly, in a military sworn to respect civilian authority, the role of good moral character is as critical as it is obvious.

Second, strong moral character is not always as evident as we would like--in the military profession as well as others in the modern world. While it may be the case that the military is more fundamentally sound than certain other professions, there is surely room for improvement, as scandals such as Iran-Contra aptly attest.

Given, then, the requirement for moral virtue, what if anything can be done to inculcate it in the members of the profession?

Let me confess at the outset that I subscribe to the notion that morality is objectively real; that is to say that certain characters are objectively preferable to others. Moreover, I'll also put my cards on the table in admitting that I believe character can be developed. That, in other words, one can make a difference, and one can tell when one's made it. There are theoretical perspectives that deny both of these claims, but we've simply insufficient time to discuss them at this juncture. Suffice it to say, however, that I am dubious as to the persuasiveness of moral relativism or moral skepticism and will approach the topic from a moral objectivist and cognitive-developmental theoretical foundation.

I'd like to review a scheme for the development of moral character that shares this perspective, present what empirical evidence is available for its claims, and discuss certain difficulties with both the theory and the empirical research. I hope to show that the development of character is feasible, but I admit that it is by no means simple.

## AN ANCIENT FRAMEWORK FOR CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, notes that something is virtuous, or excellent, if it performs its function well. Consequently, an excellent flute is one that produces clear notes; an excellent pen is one that writes cleanly, and so on. An excellent human being is one that reasons well and chooses well--in short, one who *lives* well. This of course is easier said than done.

We must first become wise enough to discover the most virtuous option among our alternatives. This ability to reason excellently, called intellectual virtue, is only the first step, for knowing what is most virtuous is not the same as choosing it. Knowing, for example, that one ought to go running regularly is not the same as choosing to go running regularly. To know the good, for Aristotle, is by no means to do the good. One must also decide to do what one knows it is right to do. This is the second sort of virtue that Aristotle viewed as necessary for a flourishing life--moral virtue.

Hence, Aristotle recommends a two pronged approach to living virtuously--first the right choice must be discovered through reason. Second, the dictates of reason must be put into action--the rubber has to hit the road.

Now, while humans are adapted to receive virtue, they are not born with it. There is, however, hope. Reason permits the transmission of wisdom without direct experience. Humans develop their reason through education--a lengthy, sometimes painful, but always worthwhile enterprise. An individual able to reason well has a head start on virtue, and this is an aspect of the Aristotelian perspective that's quite congenial to the cognitive development approach assumed in this paper. Good reasoning can be learned.

Still, all of us can remember having chosen to act against the dictates of reason. How many of us have appreciated the concept of keeping to a budget while in economics class, and then failed to keep to a budget on a vacation? Similarly, most of us are aware of the biological consequences of a fat and sugar laden diet, but not everyone passes up rich meals. In short, there seems to be ample evidence that we need something more than just intellectual virtue.

We need moral virtue in order to do what we know we ought to do. As humans, however, we aren't born with robust moral virtue--it must be developed through exercise. This exercise isn't always easily embraced.

Consider the couch potato. Generally speaking, it takes considerable encouragement from others to provoke the sluggish into exercising. Once they begin such a regimen, under the eye, say, of their friendly basic military training instructor or coach, they find that their motive for exercising begins to change. At first, one simply wishes to avoid unwelcome attention from an authority. Later the motive may become peer pressure. Later still, a genuine enjoyment in the act of running--so well habituated that one feels out of sorts if one skips the normal training regimen. Similarly, it takes practice to develop a cigarette habit; to break it one must likewise practice not smoking.

Intellectual and moral virtue reinforce each other. The development of virtuous habits requires reason--first the reason of elders--and later, the autonomous reason of each actor. Intellectual virtue is logically prior to moral virtue, as one must reason well if one is to have a chance of choosing well. Intellectual virtue enables one to determine that one ought to act in certain ways. Nevertheless, the translation of good reason into good choosing requires moral virtue--which can develop through practice at any age, though it is most efficient in the youth. While it's easier to develop a reliable tennis serve in one's youth, it's not impossible for the more mature as long as they're willing to practice.

#### THE ANCIENT MODEL IN MODERN PRACTICE

Now it's no secret that the nation's military academies are designed with the above notions in mind. That is in fact perhaps their most obvious distinction from civilian colleges and universities. In Aristotle's terms, most schools focus on the development of intellectual virtue only--an academy, by contrast, concerns itself with both the intellectual and moral virtues of its students. In particular, the emphasis at the academies on honor lends itself to explication in Aristotelian terms.

The Air Force Academy, the institution with which I am most familiar, has both an honor code and an honor system. The distinction is important, as the honor code is meant to summarize the essentials of honorable--virtuous--behavior in the military profession: "We will not lie, steal, or cheat, nor tolerate among us anyone who does."<sup>1</sup> The code reflects not only a negative principle--those acts from which cadets must refrain--but also a positive duty to police the community through non-toleration. The rationale for the code is continually described to cadets throughout their four years, beginning in their basic training. Much of the honor education is conducted by upperclass cadets. The sophistication of the explanations increases as the cadets progress through the curriculum. A one semester course in classical ethical theory and professional ethics is included and is usually taken during the junior year. Hence, the development of moral reasoning, a critical element of intellectual virtue, is given tremendous attention. The result, of course, is intended to be that graduates recognize that dishonorable behavior is unreasonable and unprofessional.

What, however, of the system? As one might suppose, this is the enforcement mechanism for the ideals expressed by the code. Individuals entering the academy are not expected to have fully developed virtue. Rather, just as the academy takes it upon itself to teach intellectual virtue, it also assumes the role of trainer in moral virtue. The honor system reflects the academy's cognizance of the fact that it's possible to know what's right and to fail to do it. Hence, moral behavior is encouraged through the threat of sanction for dishonorable behavior. The system is meant to provide the same nudge to the cadet that a demanding coach provides on a team. It's there to provide external discipline to supplement the not yet fully developed internal moral virtue. In theory, the intellectual and moral development will occur through the four years and the graduate reasons well and chooses well. After four years of education as to why it's best to behave honorably, and four years practicing honorable behavior, the graduate should not only be able to distinguish right from wrong, but also be habituated to act rightly. In short, part of being a full-fledged member of the profession is to be virtuous in the Aristotelian sense.

Now, that's how Aristotle's scheme is meant to be put into practice at the academies--what evidence do we have that it works?

## EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

### Intellectual Virtue

On the intellectual front, there seem to be reasons to be sanguine. Moral reasoning skills can be taught, and improvement measured. Numerous studies have been conducted showing that this is the case. The work of Lawrence Kohlberg is representative.

Kohlberg divides moral reasoning ability into three levels; each of these levels includes two stages. The higher the stage, the more advanced the moral reasoning skill. Generally speaking, the higher the stage of moral reasoning, the more impartial and principled the reasoning becomes. Although it is very crude compared to Kohlberg's own work, the table below provides a very broad overview of Kohlberg's hierarchy and is adapted from his scale.

### KOHLBERG'S HIERARCHY (ADAPTED FOR JSOCPE)<sup>2</sup>

STAGE	TYPICAL BEHAVIOR
Level One: <i>Preconventional</i> Stage 1: Obedience/Avoiding Punishment	Complies with authority to avoid punishment
Stage 2: Naive Egoism	Seeks external reward
Level Two: <i>Conventional</i> Stage 3: "Good Boy" Orientation	Conforms to receive approval/avoid disapproval
Stage 4: Social Order Maintenance	Seeks to please legitimate authority
Level Three: <i>Postconventional</i> Stage 5: Contractarian	Conforms to socially derived norms/laws
Stage 6: Self-Legislation	Conforms to principles of conscience

Now it's undoubtedly true that one may wish to take issue with Kohlberg's preferring one sort of basis for moral judgment over another, but this concern should not bother us just now, for

the point is that progression upward along Kohlberg's scale has been shown to be possible. Moreover, progression is fostered by education in moral reasoning. Kohlberg measures the level of moral reasoning someone employs via the Defining Issues Test. In this test moral dilemmas are presented to the subject, who must then reply with a recommendation for a certain behavior. A typical test might describe a couple in which the wife is ailing from a fatal but curable malady. The couple cannot afford to purchase the remedy, but the husband, Heinz, could steal the valuable medicine. The subject is queried to determine whether Heinz should commit the theft. A response that recommends stealing, for principled reasons such as that life is more valuable than property, earns placement in the postconventional level, whereas pure commitment to obedience to law earns placement in the conventional level--and avoiding the theft for fear of being caught and punished a lower evaluation still.<sup>3</sup> Notably, the same recommendation may be evaluated as reflecting different levels of moral reasoning depending upon what story is told to justify the recommendation. The same behavior may also result from different levels of moral cognition. For example, among student subjects at Berkeley, 80% of the stage six students were arrested while protesting at a free speech sit-in--as were 60 % of the students at stage two. The behavior of the two groups was identical, but the reasons they held for behaving as they did varied considerably. The stage six students protested against a contractarian view held by the university that hampered the expression of political views. The stage two students, by contrast, seemed to confuse principled judgment with "egoistic relativism, exchange, and revenge".<sup>4</sup>

Progress upward through the levels is facilitated by education in moral reasoning. In Kohlberg's words,

In practice, then, our experimental efforts at moral education have involved getting students at one level, say Stage 2, to argue with those at the next level, say Stage 3. The teacher would support and clarify the Stage 3 arguments. Then he would pit the Stage 3 students against the Stage 4 students on a new dilemma. Initial results with this method with a junior high school group indicated that 50 percent of the students moved up one stage and 10 percent moved up two stages. In comparison, only 10 percent of a control group moved up one stage in the four month period involved.<sup>5</sup>

Such results have been replicated frequently. And they are not obtained only among children. James Rest has shown that moral development can be fostered well into adulthood, and that

education, not merely age, is responsible for much of the development.<sup>6</sup> It does seem that moral reasoning can be developed through education.

#### Moral Virtue

Given that there is reason to be optimistic that intellectual virtue can be developed, what of its complement, moral virtue?

Initially, it might be helpful to determine whether persons' stages of reasoning are correlated to their behavior. That is, does the demonstrated capability of reasoning at a morally sophisticated level find reflection in the behavior of the same individuals?

There does seem to be some evidence for this claim--though the correlation is not always strong. In an experiment studying cheating, 17% of those at higher stages cheated, whereas 53% of those at the lower stages cheated.<sup>7</sup> Still, the general body of research into correlations between moral reasoning and honesty is a bit ambiguous. "Frequently, however, even when statistically significant, the relations are low, which suggests that moral reasoning is not the only determinant of moral behavior in the area of honesty."<sup>8</sup>

In studies of altruistic behavior, the results are also a bit inconsistent. "(O)f 19 studies, 11 offer a clear and unambiguous confirmation of the hypothesis that relates moral cognition and altruistic behavior, 4 present negative results...the remaining 4 studies...report mixed or ambiguous findings."<sup>9</sup>

The extent of compliance in the famous Milgram experiment, however, has been unambiguously correlated to levels of moral reasoning.

Readers will recall that the Milgram studies required the subject to "assist" an experimenter in a learning "experiment." The experimenter's confederate was the "subject" of the "experiment." The experimenter asked the real subject to administer electric shocks to the confederate whenever the confederate replied incorrectly to a query. Each time the confederate made a mistake the voltage was to be increased. The subject had before him a machine with a button to administer the shocks and a dial marked progressively from 15 to 450 volts, with accompanying labels reading, for example, "slight shock," "strong intensity shock," "danger," and "XXX."<sup>10</sup>

Seventy five percent of stage 6 subjects either quit or refused to shock the confederate. Only 13% of the lower levels refused.<sup>11</sup> In the case of disobeying immoral orders, even if they are perceived to come from a legitimate authority, there is a clear correlation between reasoning ability and behavior.

Though it is by no means overwhelming, the research does tend to support the notion that moral reasoning is correlated to moral behavior.

#### CAN MORAL VIRTUE BE INCULCATED?

I did not uncover any convincing empirical research to support the notion that practicing virtuous behavior leads to its inculcation--though anecdotal evidence is plentiful, and almost everybody can point to some perhaps less controversial evidence that they sometimes strive to ingrain certain habits via practice, such as a golf swing. Driving ranges seem to depend upon our belief that practice does tend to lead to an improved game.

Moral behavior however is a great deal more involved than a golf swing. The lack of unambiguous empirical support for its inculcation through practice should not be surprising for a number of reasons. The following considerations should show that looking for clean evidence of the relationship between practicing, say, honest acts, and then finding honesty ingrained is an ill-formed quest. While it's possible to hit a golf ball perfectly by accident, it's impossible to be an honest person *accidentally*. This is because being honest involves certain cognitions which generate honest acts. A golf swing is good or bad regardless of the golfer's intention--a genuinely honest confession, say, requires the conscious intention to tell the truth because that's the virtuous choice.

An inquiry into moral behavior would report only on empirical findings--such as falsehoods being uttered. But acting from the virtue of honesty, according to Aristotle's model, requires an intention to tell the truth--and intentions aren't measurable empirically. We can count the number of falsehoods uttered, but this accounts only for behavior--not for attitude. Indeed, it's plain that many false claims are the result of ignorance. It's likewise with other behaviors along the moral spectrum. The distinction between stealing and borrowing, at least under certain



conditions, can be determined only by the individual committing the act. Perhaps it is for this reason that the best support for Aristotle's claims results from introspection.

#### SOME ISSUES

Aristotle himself was aware of the difficulties arising in trying to assess another's virtue.

The question might be asked, what we mean by saying that we must become just by doing just acts, and temperate by doing temperate acts; for if men do just and temperate acts, they are already just and temperate, exactly as, if they do what is in accordance with the laws of grammar and of music, they are grammarians and musicians.

Or is this not true even of the arts? It is possible to do something that is in accordance with the laws of grammar, either by chance or at the suggestion of another. A man will be a grammarian, then, only when he has both done something grammatical and done it grammatically; and this means doing it in accordance with the grammatical knowledge in himself.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, the virtuous individual is only so if he acts virtuously because of choosing to act virtuously. While we can train a mynah bird to speak grammatically, no one accuses the bird of speaking *from* grammar. Likewise, even though we may observe seemingly virtuous behavior, we have no way of knowing whether it genuinely is virtuous as we cannot observe why the behavior is chosen. In terms of professional education, we really have no way of measuring a student's developing virtue as virtue. If one behaves honorably because of fear of the honor system the behavior is indistinguishable from the individual who behaves honorably for its own sake.

Actions, then, are called just and temperate when they are such as the just or the temperate man would do; but it is not the man who does these that is just and temperate, but the man who also does them *as* just and temperate men do them.<sup>13</sup>

Here then is one potential stumbling block for those who would inculcate virtue in others via practice. It is possible that the sanction be mistaken for the motive--that is--it is possible to permit the system to replace the code in the minds of those it is intended to benefit. This, of course, would generate cognitive lodging somewhere in Kohlberg's lower regions of egoism, while producing actors whose specialty is not getting caught. Education seems to be the only

method of trying to prevent the generation of cynicism with respect to ethics. An individual can be forced to behave in a certain way, given a sufficiently robust enforcement system--he cannot, however, be forced to like it. It seems, then, that reward and punishment systems meant to foster moral habituation must be circumspect. The potential for damage is great.

Still we cannot do without some scheme for habituation. To claim understanding and to display it are different indeed. Aristotle put it nicely,

It is well said, then, that it is by doing just acts that the just man is produced, and by doing temperate acts the temperate man; without doing these no one would have even a prospect of becoming good.

But most people do not do these, but take refuge in theory and think they are being philosophers and will become good in this way, behaving somewhat like patients who listen attentively to their doctors, but do none of the things they are ordered to do.<sup>14</sup>

As virtue involves choice, it's of course possible to choose less than virtuous behavior. It would seem that the caveat provided above results from a difficult practical problem.

As a flight instructor must permit her student to make mistakes if he's ever going to learn to fly, yet must simultaneously ensure that nobody gets hurt in the process, so the development of virtue requires precisely the right amount of freedom that will permit choosing without courting disaster. To close off choice is to stunt the growth of virtue. To permit excess freedom of action too early is to entertain the possibility of catastrophe. The problem is further complicated as most institutions grant freedom to classes of students, while it's plain that the individual rate of virtue development will vary among students. It is this struggle that might account for the occasionally tumultuous wrestling with just how best to administer honor and other moral training at the academies. Whatever else it might be, the inculcation of virtue is no simple task.

In fact, useful parallels may be drawn between the effort to grow virtuous professionals and the successful rearing of children. Both require wisdom and patience. Children cannot become virtuous by themselves. The parent, like the educator, must supply rational guidance without stunting the growth of the child's moral autonomy. Obedience is a stepping stone to virtue, but it can never substitute for it. Nevertheless, a judicious use of external sanctions is necessary, as persuasion alone is rarely sufficient.

Aristotle himself puts the problem well,

Now if arguments were in themselves enough to make men good, they would justly, as Theognis says, have won very great rewards, and such rewards should have been provided; but as things are, while they seem to have power to encourage and stimulate the generous-minded among our youth, and to make a character which is gently born, and a true lover of what is noble, ready to be possessed by virtue, they are not able to encourage the many to nobility and goodness. For these do not by nature obey the sense of shame, but only fear, and do not abstain from bad acts because of their baseness but through fear of punishment; living by passion they 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 the traits that have long since been incorporated in the character; and perhaps we must be content if, when all the influences by which we are thought to become good are present, we get some tincture of virtue.<sup>15</sup>

How best to effect the development in others outside of the purely intellectual realm: Once again Aristotle brings to bear common sense. He notes that the law in some states accomplishes this--providing rewards and punishment for virtuous behavior or otherwise. In states without such laws,

(It would seem right for each man to help his children and friends towards virtue, and that they should have the power, or at least the will, to do this.

It would seem from what has been said that he can do this better if he makes himself capable of legislating. For public control is plainly effected by laws, and good control by good laws; whether written or unwritten would seem to make no difference, nor whether they are laws providing for the education of individuals or of groups--any more than it does in the case of music or gymnastics and other such pursuits. For as in cities laws and prevailing types of character have force, so in households do the injunctions and the habits of the father.<sup>16</sup>

It's the injunctions *and* habits that those who would inculcate virtue in others must cultivate. As with parenting, leadership requires moral exemplarism. Educators in the professions must practice what they preach. This requires acute discernment on the part of the professional school's leadership. The moral realm must be distinguished in practice as well as in word from all others.<sup>17</sup> Students must recognize that their mentors take the moral dimension of their profession more seriously than any other. To refer to, say, excellent academic scores in the same praiseworthy fashion as honorable behavior is to render indistinct the difference between genuinely moral behavior and what is oftentimes purely instrumental behavior. The student who

fails an exam, having avoided cheating though the opportunity presented itself seems praiseworthy in a way that the student who simply studied and did well does not. Both are praiseworthy, to be sure, but one provided evidence of moral virtue where the other did not. Likewise, it should be obvious that to refer to a manifestly immature act as immoral is to cheapen morality. Educators must recognize the difference between immoral behavior and immature behavior.

In general this seems to be the case in my experience with service academies. It's well recognized by most that, given enough effort, a student can survive just about any difficulty except one that's honor-related. The more clear this distinction becomes, it seems plausible, the less frequent honor problems will become.

#### SUMMARY

While there seems to be no empirical validation of the Aristotelian method in the arena of moral virtue, the methodological difficulty involved in producing such data may well explain why none exists. It may be that to search for such data is to bark up the wrong tree. In the arena of intellectual virtue, the evidence seems unambiguously to support the claim that moral reasoning can be taught. The uncertain correlation between moral reasoning and moral behavior is disquieting, though perhaps this speaks more to the author's idealism than anything else. Aristotle's wisdom comes to mind once again: "(I)t is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits."<sup>18</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> US Air Force Academy, *Air Force Academy Catalog, 1985-86*. p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Kohlberg's scale as printed in Grace Craig, *Human Development*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc. 1976), p. 109. and Lawrence Kohlberg, "Moral Development: A Modern Statement of the Platonic View," in *Issues in Moral Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Donaldson (New York: McGraw-Hill. 1986), pp. 38-39.

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Kohlberg, "Moral Stages and Moralization," in *Moral Development and Behavior*, ed. Thomas Lickona (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976), p. 36

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Kohlberg, "Moral Development: A Modern Statement of the Platonic View," in *Issues in Moral Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Donaldson (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986), p. 42.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> James Rest and Darcia Narvaez, "The College Experience and Moral Development" in *Handbook of Moral Behavior and Development Volume 2: Research*, ed. William Kurtines and Jacob Gewirtz (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Earlbaum Associates, 1991) pp. 234-235.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Mischel and Harriet Mischel, "A Cognitive Social-Learning Approach to Morality and Self-Regulation," in Lickona, op. cit. p. 101.

<sup>8</sup> Augusto Blasi, "Bridging Moral Cognition and Moral Action: A Critical Review of the Literature," *Psychological Bulletin*, 88, 1980, p. 25

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 34.

<sup>10</sup> D. Rosenhan, Bert Moore, and Bill Underwood, "The Social Psychology of Moral Behavior," in Lickona, op. cit. p. 242

<sup>11</sup> Alan Lockwood, "Moral Reasoning and Public Policy Debate," in Lickona, op. cit. p. 322.

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, Chap. 3. 1105a16-27, Richard McKeon, trans. 1941.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 1105b5-9.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 1105b9-16.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 1179b4-19.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 1180a33-b5.

<sup>17</sup> Lawrence Kohlberg, "Stages of Moral Development as a Basis for Moral Education," in *Moral Development, Moral Education, and Kohlberg*, ed. Brenda Munsey (Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1980), p. 85.

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, op. cit. 1094b24-25.

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