

The role of integrity in higher education

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Abstract

This paper argues that virtue ethics, as prominently expressed in the philosophy of Aristotle, has a crucial role in education in general and higher education in particular. Virtue ethics, which initially emerged as a rival account to deontology and consequentialism, developed from dissatisfaction with the notions of duty and obligation and their central roles in understanding morality. It also grew out of an objection to the use of rigid moral rules and principles and their application to diverse and different moral situations. Virtue ethics is character-based. The article specifically focuses on the centrality of the virtue of integrity among teachers and students in higher education. It therefore proposes shifting our attention from the ethical principles, rules, duties or obligations to virtues and character in promoting ethical behaviour.

Introduction

History of philosophy of education presents ethics as an essential and central dimension in education. In an endeavor to reinforce this enduring truism, this essay focuses on the role of integrity, a constituent part of virtue ethics, in teaching and learning. Virtue ethics is rooted in classical thought, especially in the writings of Aristotle. To many contemporary thinkers, virtue ethics appears dead and buried in the face of its predominant rivals, deontological and consequentialist ethics. However, virtue ethics has recently found new adherents and it is gradually gaining scholarly attention. It is in fact a relatively new development in contemporary moral philosophy. The main argument of this essay is that the virtue of integrity is a necessary dimension for teachers and students in higher education. To defend this thesis, the essay stresses the importance of virtue ethics, establishes the meaning of integrity and its sphere of application, and determines how integrity improves educational outcomes.

A brief history of virtue ethics

Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics* (1985), especially his account of moral virtues in book two, offers the earliest and most influential systematic account of virtue theory. Although Aristotle's account of virtue ethics competed with rival moral theories, particularly those offered by Epicureanism and Stoicism, it had the assumed status of the definitive account of morality by the late Middle Ages. However, the rise of the Renaissance, Scientific Revolution, and Enlightenment thought, and their challenge to the authority of theological positions, saw a decline in Aristotle's virtue ethics.

The modern period saw the rise of newer accounts of moral obligation. By the 19th century, the rule-based moral theories such as utilitarianism and Kantian ethics had supplanted the character trait emphasis of virtue theory. However, the contemporary writings, especially Elisabeth Anscombe's paper titled "Modern Moral

Philosophy" (1958) and Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1984), have seen a renewed interest in the moral tradition of virtue theory. The former argues against a law conception of ethics that deals exclusively with obligation and duty, while the latter argues strongly against fragmented and conflicting theories in contemporary ethics. The two theorists propose a return to, or re-establishment of, the moral tradition of virtue ethics.

The importance of virtue ethics theory

The two main rival normative theories to virtue ethics, deontological and consequentialist ethics, aim at articulating principles or rules that help an agent decide how to act in a given situation. They tend to focus primarily on people's actions and doings and ask what rules require of us in particular circumstances. Some set principles or criteria which determine whether an action is right or wrong.

De George (1982, p. 37) offers some clarification of consequentialist and deontological ethics:

One approach argues on the basis of consequences [consequentialist] [...] it states that whether an action is right or wrong depends on the consequences of that action [...]. The second basic approach is called the deontological approach. It states that duty is the basic moral category, and that duty is independent of consequences. An action is right if it has certain characteristics or is of a certain kind, and wrong if it has other characteristics or is of a certain kind.

Utilitarianism and Kantian ethics are examples of consequentialist and deontological ethics, respectively. According to utilitarianism, an action is good or right when it achieves the greatest happiness for the greatest number, otherwise it is bad. Kantian ethics, based on the concept of duty, holds that an action is good if it is based on good intention. For utilitarians, an action in itself has no moral worth and takes moral value only when it is considered in conjunction with its effects. To the contrary, Kantians argue that "what makes an action right is not its consequences but the fact that it conforms to the moral law" (De George, 1982, p. 58). For Kant the moral law or the highest principle of morality is based on human reason.

This essay does not seek to undertake a comprehensive discussion of consequentialist and deontological ethics, but to demonstrate their divergence in their rivalry to virtue ethics. These theories are quite useful and both sophisticated and unsophisticated minds commonly appeal to them in decision-making on a variety of matters. However, any ethical theory that begins from some external demands faces the challenge of legitimacy. The challenge is that what ought to be done remains foreign to who ought to do it. Such an approach to ethics largely ignores the personality of the individual that guarantees the actions.

Virtue ethics emphasises character, rather than rules or consequences, as the key element in ethical thinking. William H. Shaw (1993) observes that virtue is twofold, partly intellectual and partly moral, of which the former is a result of teaching and the latter is an outcome of habit. After grappling with what constitutes a good life (*eudaimonia*), the virtue theorists consider the behaviours that will allow a person to achieve that good life: these habits and behaviours are the virtues (*arête*). Virtue ethics focuses on the cultivation of certain ideals that people, as human beings, should pursue. A virtue is a habit or quality that allows the bearer to succeed at his or her purpose. Virtues are therefore those qualities of the soul that are necessary for human flourishing. These habits or qualities are such that when acquired they become characteristic of the person. The person who acquires the virtue of integrity becomes a person of integrity or an integral personality or, more broadly, a virtuous

person. The main advantage of virtue ethics is that it works towards bridging the gap between human beings and their actions. It makes obligation part of the personality of the actor.

Virtue ethics, like any other system of ethics, is not without its problems. Critics of virtue theory argue that in real-life situations, we do not condemn people for having bad character traits but, instead, for committing bad actions. Nafsika (2006) offers three main objections to virtue theory. First, that virtue ethics is self-centered because of its primary concern with the agent's character. Second, that virtue ethics, with its emphasis on the imprecise nature of ethics, fails to give us any help with the practicalities of how we should behave. Critics argue that a theory that fails to be action-guiding is no good as a moral theory. Third, that virtue fails to account for moral luck. If the development of virtue (and vice) is subject to luck, is it fair to praise the virtuous (and blame the vicious) for something that was outside their control? However, virtue theorists have ready responses to these objections. Virtue ethics is 'other' regarding, offers the virtuous person as a moral exemplar, and emphasises the fragility of virtue. They argue that virtue is precious and as such the road to virtue is difficult and those who pursue it should guard against its loss.

Wilson (as cited in Tobin, 2000, p. 301), argue that virtues cannot be "a satisfactory basis on which to proceed" because the "task of making a satisfactory list of moral virtues runs into a great many difficulties". Lack of tradition of agreement about what human flourishing is compounds the difficulties. Further, different people, cultures and societies often have vastly different opinions on what constitutes a virtue. However, human flourishing, as a central idea in virtue ethics, is as hard to grasp as the central ideas of rationality and happiness in Kantian and utilitarian ethics, respectively.

Although virtue ethics may not offer procedures for determining obligation, identification and execution of those procedures stem out of the cultivation of virtue. Virtue ethics makes an effort to harmonise duties and the motivation to undertake them. The rule or act-centred morality that evaluates rules or actions independent of the actor misses the most important element in ethics – the personality of the actor.

The meaning of integrity

Most people who assume positions of responsibility promise to deliver integrity, but in many cases the promises go unfulfilled. It is important to explore the meaning of this much cherished value. Baltimore (1999, p. 260) defines integrity as "the state or quality of being complete, undivided, (and) unbroken". Considering this definition, integrity connotes a quality of life marked by completeness or perfection. To view integrity as some form of being whole, sound, upright and honest is consistent with the Aristotelian view of continuously learning and seeking to grow in virtue. Individuals' efforts to deal with conflicting intentions, continuously evaluate themselves and to improve their personalities is an attempt to achieve some level of completeness.

Cox, La Caze and Levine (2003, p. 1) observe that there is little agreement on a precise definition of integrity, although "there are clusters of shared intuitions". The idea of integrity resists easy definition since "the pursuit of integrity is simply the problem of living" (Cox et.al., p. xiv). In line with reasoning, integrity develops in the context of social interaction. Integrity may refer to a state or quality of life characterised by a habit of acting on good reason, which results in harmony of the soul. An integral personality or character is one who is disposed to act on good reason. Through the practice of acting on reason, an integral personality has a serene mind that enables him or her to discern what is right or wrong. An integral personality takes pursuit of knowledge and understanding seriously. Such a personality, however, does not exclude natural human limitations. Of most importance in this definition,

following Aristotelian reasoning, is its emphasis on a right frame of mind that guarantees right action. The virtue of integrity becomes the basic guide to decision-making. It is a quality of a moral actor regarding character, motivations, and intentions.

People of integrity always stand for what is good and adopt well thought out and negotiated positions. A person of integrity gives situations thorough thought to adopt a reason oriented course of action. Values of openness, affection, and flexibility are also characteristic of him or her. A person of integrity is not a 'yes-person' because, as the old saying has it, 'if you do not stand for something, you will fall for anything'. Drucker (cited in Solomon, 1999, p. 6) observes that integrity is not a single virtue but "an encapsulation, the unity of virtues". Some virtues that feature in integrity include justice, honesty, fairness, truthfulness, and courage. Integrity becomes a summary of virtues, which is pertinent in all contexts, and its constituents are virtues that are pertinent in particular situations. The attainment of a particular virtue is a step towards the attainment of integrity, which is a total package.

While we sometimes use 'integrity' and 'morality' synonymously, it is possible to separate 'acting with integrity' from 'acting morally'. It is possible for persons of integrity, as a result of mistaken moral views held, to act immorally though they would usually not know they are acting so. Another important feature of integrity is that it provides the affinity between human core value and human behavior (Treston, 1995). This entails acting on what one believes to be good for human flourishing. Carter (1999) believes in 'active integrity', which involves both saying openly that you are acting on your understanding of good, and openly challenging what is bad. To this end, integrity extends further than just discerning what is good. It also involves acting on what is good and openly challenging what is bad. A person of integrity stands for what is right even at personal cost. Of importance here is integrity as an action oriented virtue.

The debate between those who accept and those who dismiss the possibility of virtue is not within the scope of this essay. The paper takes the possibility of integrity as granted because people of integrity are identifiable in the world in which we live. To illustrate active integrity, Carter (1999) cites Nelson Mandela's testimony, when on trial together with another ten people, over two hundred counts of "sabotage aimed at facilitating violent revolution and an armed invasion" of South Africa. Mandela testified:

Having said this, I must deal immediately and at some length with the question of violence. Some of the things so far told the court are true and some are untrue. I do not, however, deny that I planned sabotage. I did not plan it in the spirit of recklessness nor because I have love for violence. I planned it as a result of *a calm and sober assessment* of the political situation that had arisen after many years of tyranny, exploitation, and oppression of my people by whites [emphasis added].

Although Mandela's example may be a graphic one, it presents some key stages in active integrity. These stages include analysis of the situation at hand, reflecting on possible courses of action, and deciding on a particular course of action. He adopted a course of action recognised as illegal and was willing to tell the court at personal risk. Integrity calls for practical wisdom.

Carter's observation reveals important insights on the virtue of integrity. First, that only active integrity is worthwhile for human flourishing. Passive integrity, which ends at the point of discerning what is admirable, is not integrity at all. Second, that integrity is called for in the context of challenge. In Mandela's case, two options were available, to tell the truth and be convicted or to tell a lie and, perhaps, be discharged. Therefore, integrity emerges in the context of a moral dilemma or challenge.

Integrity in teaching and learning

Having explored the concept of integrity, I would now like to focus on its role in teaching and learning situations in higher education. To achieve this end some key ideas also need clarification. These terms are 'education', 'teaching', and 'learning'. Education is a polymorphous concept. Hirst and Peters (1970, p. 19) construe education as "a family of processes whose principle of unity is the development of desirable qualities in people". Knowledge and understanding play an important part in the development of the states of mind. Two conditions, desirability and knowledge, stand out clearly whenever we talk of education. Throughout the history of education, philosophers of education concur on the idea that ethics is in-built in the idea of education. Therefore, all education should be morally unobjectionable or should satisfy the desirability condition.

Teaching and learning are the two processes involved in education. Akinpelu (1981) defines teaching as a system of actions intended to induce learning. The definition is limited in that it remains silent about who is doing the teaching, what is being taught, the person in whom learning is being induced, and the methods used in inducing learning. Scheffler (1970) conceives teaching as an activity aimed at achieving learning, and practiced in such a manner as to respect the student's intellectual integrity and capacity for independent judgment. The sole intention of teaching is to bring about learning. Learning refers to a variety of processes through which a person gains knowledge. The conditions of learning include both conscious experience and mastery of things learnt (Hirst & Peters, 1970).

Although both teaching and learning are involved in education, there is little logical connection between the two regarding education. Hirst and Peters (1970) observe that while learning is logically necessary to education, teaching is not. However, teaching is crucial to any abstract and complex objective oriented learning process, which is the hallmark of educational institutions. The teacher activates, motivates, facilitates, and directs the learning process to ensure timely achievement of set educational objectives. To summarise ideas about education, teaching, and learning, Hirst and Peters (1970, p. 86) state that "educational processes are those processes of learning, which may be stimulated by teaching, out of which desirable states of mind, involving knowledge and understanding, develop".

Integrity has a central role in education in general and higher education in particular. It enables teachers and learners "to act according to the deepest desires of the heart" (Treston, 1995, p. 9). Since teachers and learners of integrity desire the realisation of what is admirable, the educational outcomes are likely to improve. Education aims at the development of critical thinking, specialised knowledge, autonomy, ethical and aesthetic sensitivity in the learner. Although these aims of education are important at every level of education, it should be stressed that they are most crucial in higher education. Both teachers in and graduates from institutions of higher learning have the responsibility of contributing to the development of their nations and the world as a whole. Such a responsibility rules out any element of hypocrisy. Hypocritical teachers and learners act in ways contrary to what they believe to be admirable. Integral personalities are autonomous beings who are critical for the development of any society. Development, be it social, economic or political, is only possible when autonomous persons interrogate and deliberate on issues of national and global interests.

Teachers and learners in higher education demonstrate their integrity by being "resolute in upholding stances that are congruent with their values, even though their actions may sometimes conflict with personal convenience" (Treston, 1995, p. 10). Sometimes teachers and students fall for what they believe to be unvirtuous for personal convenience, and neglect what they believe to be virtuous to avoid personal embarrassment or criticism. Integrity demands courage to act according to one's inner

moral convictions even at personal cost. Situations that call for integrity often arise in higher education, especially in the context of assessment. A learner hard pressed for time to research may be tempted to cheat in an assignment to attain a good grade. Cases in which learners flout the rules of research may go unnoticed and this would compromise the value of education. Teachers are at times tempted to cheat in evaluating a colleague's work, especially for promotion purposes. In these and similar cases, it takes integrity for the teacher and the learner to proceed.

Integrity liberates teachers and learners from slavery to popular ideologies that often turn out to be harmful to humanity. There may be popular ideas among teachers and students on how to deal with specific challenges. Integrity, a distinct mark of full humanity, encourages the harmonisation of thought and action. Integrity, although exercised in particular situations, takes into account the grand goal of human flourishing.

Although integrity involves discerning, holding on to and acting on what is admirable, teachers and learners of integrity are flexible and incorporate failure in their worldviews. As noted above, persons of integrity may act immorally as a result of mistaken moral beliefs. It is in this context that integrity demands both teachers and learners to be open to criticism, participate in discussions, and adopt well negotiated and thought out positions. A teacher or learner of integrity is a team member who has a genuine willingness to learn and practice what is virtuous. He or she is aware of the tentative character of knowledge, and the need to adjust views considering new evidence. The major goal of virtue ethics theory is that of improving the self which in turn determines the improvement of the larger community.

Integrity is also central to the moral standing of educational institutions. A good educational institution is not that which conforms to some pre-set moral standards, but one populated by admirable people and one in which admirable people make decisions. Virtue ethics does not set ethical principles to adhere to, but demands the development of some desirable qualities, dispositions or virtues in the person who performs particular acts. Development of these character traits or virtues that culminate in integrity would guarantee actions that reflect those qualities. Considering Solomon's view of integrity as an encapsulation of virtues, integral personalities do not exhibit a single virtue but a unity of virtues.

The teachers and students of integrity are those who can strike a balance between concern for internal and external goods. MacIntyre (1984, pp. 190-191) distinguishes between internal and external goods as follows:

It is characteristic of what I have called *external goods* that when achieved they are always some individual's property or possession. Moreover characteristically they are such that *the more someone has of them, the less there is for other people* [...]. External goods are therefore characteristically objects of competition in which there must be losers as well as winners. *Internal* goods are indeed the outcome of competition to excel, but it is characteristic of them that *their achievement is a good for the whole community* who participate in the practice [emphasis added].

Internal goods refer to services that one offers to the community while external goods are the rewards that one gets. As an illustration of external goods, many would agree that a salary is necessary for teachers to provide meaningful service to the nation. This enables them, like the rest of the community, to pay bills and mortgages. Lack of a meaningful salary for the teacher may result in loss of motivation and compromise in the quality of education. However, Treston (1995) might be right to observe that teaching is not just another job for material ends but a vocation or calling to communicate lifelong values, internal goods, to students.

Any obsession with material benefits would militate against concern for service. Integrity demands a balance between concern for material gains and concern for service to the community. It is not statutory law that motivates teachers and students of integrity, but the attainment of what is admirable. In that case, teachers and students in higher education would be capable of working beyond the call of duty.

Conclusion

This essay has presented virtue ethics as a worthwhile perspective, and has argued for the centrality of integrity in teaching and learning in higher education. Integrity is a state or quality of life marked by harmony of the soul that results from a habit of acting on good reason. The essay has argued for improvement of the personalities of both the teacher and the learner that influence the nature of relationships in teaching and learning; that determine the decisions made in the teaching and learning process; and that ultimately determines the quality of education. The cultivation of virtue in general and integrity in particular is critical in improving educational outcomes. What is admirable, rather than law, motivates teachers and students of integrity. Integrity tends to bridge the gap between the individual and his or her actions. This paper has observed that the goodness of individual members of society, largely corresponds to the goodness of that society. Although virtue ethics, like any other system of ethics, has some irresolvable moral conflicts built into it, it has a critical role in establishing integrity in higher education.

Author Biography

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