



Moral criteria and character education: a reply to Welch

Daniel Lapsley & Darcia Narvaez

To cite this article: Daniel Lapsley & Darcia Narvaez (2011) Moral criteria and character education: a reply to Welch, Journal of Moral Education, 40:4, 527-531, DOI: [10.1080/03057240.2011.618780](https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2011.618780)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2011.618780>



Published online: 18 Oct 2011.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 665



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)

Moral criteria and character education: a reply to Welch

Daniel Lapsley* and Darcia Narvaez
University of Notre Dame, USA

Most of the views ascribed to us we do not recognise and suggest that several misunderstandings flavour Welch's commentary. We clarify some of our position here and recommend further collaboration among philosophers and psychologists.

We are perplexed by the several claims that Welch (this issue) advances against our chapter on character education that appeared in the *Handbook of child psychology* (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006). In some instances we do not recognise the views attributed to us. In others our position is misunderstood or else fashioned into a straw man who is made to say silly things by a pastiche of selective quotations taken out of context. Of course the responsibility for making things clear rests entirely with us and so we are grateful to Welch for the opportunity to get it right.

The case against us runs somewhat as follows: we claim (on Welch's account) that character education is evacuated of ethical theory and is hence without moral content. This appears to be the conclusion that Welch derives from four propositions that are plucked from various sections of the chapter. Because we have allegedly purged ethical theory or morality from character education, and have apparently embarked on a purely empiricist account of trait selection, we are in need of moral criteria to say why one trait but not another should count in any given situation.

Welch takes issue with our attempt to understand traits or virtues in terms of a social cognitive theory of personality and the attendant claim that dispositional coherence—a stable behavioural signature—is to be found at the intersection of person by context interactions. A 'truly moral personality', he writes, should show more behavioural consistency than this and try to find ways 'to act consistently with all the virtues' out of respect for the unity of virtues. Welch is stunned by our

*Corresponding author. Department of Psychology, 118 Haggard Hall, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN 46556, USA. Email: danlapsley@nd.edu

claim that virtues are not axiomatic first principles, that virtues are derived from practices and not practices from the principles—a valuable point for which we credit David Carr (1991) in our chapter. We are accused of ethical relativism because we assert that character education does not seem to be grounded by any particular ethical theory. We are scored for our antipathy towards the core values principle (Principle 1) advocated by the Character Education Partnership (CEP). We commit the empiricist's fallacy because we are friendly towards naturalising tendencies in ethics. For Welch this means that we believe that what is moral or what is virtuous can be decided empirically by passing out questionnaires or that the point of moral psychology is to validate morality or that moral psychology can get along without ethics (or is opposed to making philosophical claims). He does not think much of our social cognitive account of moral personality, either.

Let us clarify a few things. In the opening sections of the chapter we distinguish the paradigms of moral education (ME) and character education (CE) along several fronts: in terms of preferred pedagogies (direct and indirect, mimetic or transformative), in terms of traditions of liberal education and of animating ethical theory. On the latter point we state a commonplace that ME is framed by Kantian ethics and CE by Aristotelian considerations. But we also examined the writings of traditional character educators and concluded that they are not as distinctly Aristotelian as all that; for all the talk about virtues and character, they are as much concerned about 'What should I do?' as they are with 'Who should I be?'—and hence do not seem to have a distinctive ethical theory. Admittedly, this is a small pedantic point, and of consequence only if Watson's (1990) way of distinguishing Kantian deontology and Aristotelian virtue ethics is of interest. Yet on this point Welch is determined to conclude that we are claiming that CE is animated by *no* ethical theory when all we want to say is that it is *not clear* which ethical theory motivates traditional CE. In one sense this hardly matters. Kant, too, was a virtue theorist and action-guiding principles are forthcoming from virtue ethics (Sherman, 1997; Hursthouse, 2003). But acknowledging this complexity is not a commitment to ethical relativism. It is acknowledgement that the language of morality is difficult to speak well, has different dialects and so requires facility with different moral idioms.

The distinctiveness of CE comes up in another way in our chapter. In our review we observed that a number of scholars are willing to claim the success of psychosocial intervention programmes on behalf of 'what works' in CE. Our point was that many of these programmes are not motivated by the language of morality but by literatures of developmental psychopathology or positive youth development. It is in this respect that there is nothing distinctive about CE if the focus is on any programme that yields good outcomes. If Welch is upset about this then his ire is better directed towards character educators whose criteria for what works in CE are flexible enough to include all manner of interventions and outcomes and where the language of moral valuation is largely absent. We urge Welch to read the concluding section of our chapter, where he will see that we do not give up on a distinctive and ethically-driven character education as a 'treatment'.

Indeed, we want to amend the slogan of positive youth development ('problem-free is not fully prepared') to include moral formation ('but fully-prepared is not morally adept').

We want to address two additional issues in the space allotted us. First, in our chapter we were enthusiastic about the principles endorsed by the CEP, with the exception of the first principle that articulates the core values of CE. Our antipathy towards this principle is partly of the 'bag-of-virtues' variety, but we also think it reflects an anxiety about foundations that we do not share, or else is motivated by an exceedingly narrow concern to enlist school children in the fight against ethical relativism, as if this were the most pressing reason to engage in CE. Perhaps we went on too much about that. In fact, effective schools are those that are infused with a clear moral purpose and the core values principle makes this point. Moreover, the most compelling of the CEP principles is Principle 5, which urges schools to give students an opportunity to engage in moral action. This insistence that education include a commitment to moral action makes the CEP principles something more than a mere catalogue of instructional best practice, although it is certainly that as well.

Finally, there is the matter of boundaries. Welch wants to defend philosophy against the predations of psychologists who inexplicably want to climb over the 'is-ought' gap in spite of all the scolding about Humean fallacies. We think the boundary between ethics and psychology is more porous than Welch allows; and certainly Hume did not find it impenetrable (MacIntyre, 1959). Instead we think the gap between ethical theory and moral psychology is more like a 'mending wall' (a metaphor we borrow from Robert Frost) that requires joint cooperative tending as befits good neighbours (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2008). Moral psychology is an interdisciplinary effort and a commitment to philosophical naturalism makes collaborative work possible. Morality lives and breathes and does its work in the natural world and so cannot remain autonomous of our best theories of human beings. Indeed, psychology's role looms large in many accounts of ethical naturalism. As Flanagan (1991) put it, '...scientific psychology has the potential for destabilizing, as well as for developing and refining certain assumptions underlying traditional moral theory' (p. 21).

Welch thinks a commitment to philosophical naturalism is 'self-succumbing' because it cannot itself be justified on empirical grounds. But this refutes a claim nobody is making. The joint enterprise we have in mind requires both philosophically responsible empirical psychology and empirically realistic ethical theory. The work of moral psychology will, of course, raise philosophical issues, but no respectable ethical theory can be unmindful of psychological realities either. Philosophical analysis of what counts as a moral person, for example, should minimally require, for the sake of credulity, a well-attested model of personality. For Welch to defend a view of the moral personality that is so at odds with the evidence, or to imagine that the evidence of a generation of psychological research could be so easily trumped by his thought experiments, does no credit to understanding.

There are many examples of the useful work being done along the mending wall of ethics and psychology. Flanagan (2007) makes the case for an empirical-normative project he calls *eudaimonistic scientia* (or eudaimonics) that is empirically responsible in the way it envisions how it is that humans flourish. As a philosophical project it involves ‘systematic theorizing that is continuous with science and which therefore takes the picture of persons that science engenders seriously’ (p. 2). Zagzebski (2010) articulates a virtue theory (‘exemplarism’) where the conception of the good person is not given *a priori* but is determined by empirical investigation. A skill-and-expertise model of virtue is countenanced by both psychologists (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2005) and philosophers (Jacobson, 2005; Stichter, 2007; Annas, 2008). Indeed, philosophers and psychologists are engaged on virtually every topic of interest to moral psychology (e.g. Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008).

Hence there are exciting prospects for collaboration across the mending wall of philosophy and psychology. It is one that respects the relative autonomy of disciplines and improves both through mutual correction. We are mindful, too, that the debates of moral psychology must result in action-guiding practices for educators and that the ultimate goal of moral educational theory is a practical one. This important task must be broadly shared across disciplines and we look forward to walking the mending wall with Welch to that end.

Acknowledgements

The authors profited from discussion of these issues with the ACE 17 graduate seminar in Development and Moral Education in Adolescence at the University of Notre Dame.

References

- Annas, J. (2008) The phenomenology of virtue, *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 7(1), 21–34.
- Carr, D. (1991) *Educating the virtues: an essay on the philosophical psychology of moral development and education* (London, Routledge).
- Flanagan, O. (1991) *Varieties of moral personality: ethics and psychological realism* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press).
- Flanagan, O. (2007) *The really hard problem: meaning in a material world* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press).
- Hursthouse, R. (2003) Normative virtue ethics, in: S. Darwall (Ed.) *Virtue ethics* (Oxford, Blackwell), 184–202.
- Jacobson, D. (2005) Seeing by feeling: virtues, skills and moral perception, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 8, 387–409.
- Lapsley, D. K. & Narvaez, D. (2006) Character education, in: W. Damon & R. Lerner (Series Eds) Renninger & I. Siegel (Vol. Eds) *Handbook of child psychology. Vol. 4: Child psychology in practice* (6th edn) (New York, Wiley), 248–296.
- Lapsley, D. K. & Narvaez, D. (2008) Psychologized morality and ethical theory, or Do good fences make good neighbors?, in: F. Oser & W. Veugelers (Eds) *Getting involved: global citizenship development and sources of moral values* (Rotterdam, Sense Publishers), 279–292.
- MacIntyre, A. (1959) Hume on ‘is’ and ‘ought’, *Philosophical Review*, 68, 451–468.

- Narvaez, D. & Lapsley, D. (2005) The psychological foundations of everyday morality and moral expertise, in: D. Lapsley & C. Power (Eds) *Character psychology and character education* (Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press), 140–165.
- Sherman, N. (1997) *Making a necessity of virtue: Aristotle and Kant on virtue* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (2008) *Moral psychology* (Vols 1–3) (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press).
- Stichter, M. (2007) Ethical expertise: the skill model of virtue, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 10(2), 183–194.
- Watson, G. (1990) The primacy of character, in: O. J. Flanagan & A. Rorty (Eds) *Identity, character and morality* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press), 449–470.
- Zagzebski, L. (2010) Exemplarist virtue theory, *Metaphilosophy*, 41, 41–57.