

## Character Development in Career Education: A Virtue Ethics Approach

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### INTRODUCTION

Career education is currently experiencing unprecedented growth among virtually all North American schooling jurisdictions. These programs, primarily designed to prepare students for their vocational lives, typically categorize character development objectives under the amorphous heading of employability skills.<sup>1</sup> There is an obvious moral distinction, however, between fostering skills in students and advocating the adoption of specific personal qualities, behaviors, attitudes and values. When character development objectives are taught through the formal curriculum, concerns should arise over what and whose values are being communicated. The existing skills strategy in character development may also prove pedagogically ineffective since students are not encouraged to grapple with the practical implications of different occupational behaviors. John Dewey warned that in teaching character development, “The required beliefs cannot be hammered in; the needed attitudes cannot be plastered on.”<sup>2</sup> I respond to these worries by arguing that Alasdair MacIntyre’s theory of virtue ethics offers a more appropriate model for character development in career education than the skills approach in two critical ways: (1) virtue ethics respects student agency in value formation and reduces the potential for moral indoctrination; and (2) by entertaining the actual implications or likely consequences of different occupational behaviors, the possibility that students will internalize desirable character traits as enduring workplace values significantly increases.

### MACINTYRE’S THEORY OF VIRTUE

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre seeks to rehabilitate virtue ethics as a viable moral theory based on the requirements, qualities, and objectives of historically situated practices. These practices shape human experience, on his view, since participating in them requires accepting key elements of established cultural traditions. These traditions, or practices, according to MacIntyre, are necessarily normative, and presuppose standards of truth and rationality independent of the participants. The normative dimension of historically developed practices is designed to support the idea of virtue without appealing to the biological essentialism of Aristotelian virtue ethics. In spite of rejecting essentialism as a foundation for virtue ethics, however, MacIntyre shares Aristotle’s commitment to the idea of a telos believing it provides the only available mechanism to escape the ethical relativism consistent with emotivism.<sup>3</sup> MacIntyre argues that removing the teleological component of moral thought renders any subsequent ethical framework incoherent since a telos provides the only means by which statements of value can be inferred from statements of fact without committing the naturalistic fallacy.

Rather than supporting a telos based on essentialist descriptions of human experience, then, MacIntyre invokes the directed activity of historically situated practices to yield the rationale for his account of virtue:

to enter into a practice is to enter into a relationship not only with its contemporary practitioners, but also with those who have preceded us in the practices, particularly those whose achievements extended the reach of the practice to its present point. It is thus the achievement, and *a fortiori* the authority, of a tradition which I then confront and from which I have to learn.<sup>4</sup>

Since practices exist within historically developed traditions, “the authority of both goods and standards operates in such a way to rule out all subjectivist and emotivist analyses of judgement” (AV, 190). Any coherent account of virtue, in MacIntyre’s view, must be connected to practices because they supply the necessary telos to direct human action. Central to the restoration of virtue ethics as a viable moral theory is the idea of a *practice* which MacIntyre defines as,

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended (AV, 187).

A simple game of tic-tac-toe fails to qualify as a practice on MacIntyre’s account because it is not sufficiently complex, nor is dribbling a soccer ball, but the game of soccer qualifies as a practice as does the game of chess.

MacIntyre defines virtue as “an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods” (AV, 191). Although there is no necessary hierarchy between them, unlike Goods Internal, external goods are only contingently connected to practices because they can be achieved through alternative means. MacIntyre employs the example of a chess match to elucidate the crucial distinction between the two:

There are two kinds of good possible to be gained by playing chess. On one hand there are those goods externally and contingently attached to chess playing and to other practices by the accidents of social circumstance—such as prestige, status, and money. There are alternative ways for achieving such goods, and their achievement is never to be had by engaging in some kind of practice. On the other hand, there are goods internal to the practice of chess which cannot be had in any way but playing chess or some other game of that specific kind (AV, 188).

Goods Internal are identified exclusively in relation to a particular practice since they are acquired through the unique experience of participating in the practice itself. An expert chess player might achieve external goods such as fame, wealth, and social status, but these rewards can also be attained by engaging in practices other than chess. There is nothing about fame, wealth, and social status connecting them inextricably to chess playing. Goods Internal to chess, on the other hand, are those intrinsic rewards unobtainable in any other way such as the particular satisfaction derived from a well-orchestrated and successful attack on an opponent. No activity, according to MacIntyre, qualifies as a practice unless it embodies Goods Internal.

MacIntyre further distinguishes Internal from external goods on the grounds that the latter are always connected to such things as property, possessions, or prestige. Community access to external goods is therefore limited since they “are objects of competition in which there must be losers as well as winners” (AV, 191). Whereas external goods are necessarily limited through competition and property

ownership, Goods Internal are available to all participants in a practice. Although MacIntyre readily admits Goods Internal might also be the product of competition in so far as they reflect an individual desire to excel in relation to others, unlike external goods there is no limit on the number of individuals who can benefit from their achievement. An external good related to chess, for example, might include the prestige associated with winning a title only available to the tournament champion. Goods Internal to chess, on the other hand, such as the particular intellectual satisfaction associated with plotting a successful strategy against one's opponent, are available to all practitioners. MacIntyre believes that Goods Internal make the practice in question most worth pursuing since they alone render the activity uniquely and intrinsically rewarding. When an activity is pursued solely for its external goods such as wealth and social prestige, the intrinsic intellectual rewards of that practice tend to be overlooked.

The idea of Goods Internal connected to vocations as historically situated practices has important implications for achieving the character development objectives in career education. On MacIntyre's account, the work performed by professional academics provides the paradigm case of a vocation qualifying as a practice because it affords practitioners the intrinsic intellectual rewards consistent with Goods Internal. Juxtaposed to academic life is the largely instrumental, mechanical and repetitive nature of assembly line work. Those working on production lines, or within similarly constrained and objectified working conditions, may do so merely to acquire the basic material means required for human survival. According to MacIntyre, the repetitive tasks performed on a production line, or other entirely mechanical forms of work, lack the required cognitive complexity, or respect for worker agency, to offer Goods Internal.

Although entirely mechanical occupations such as repetitive assembly line work may not qualify as practices, there is no obvious reason why most forms of work, including that performed within such trades as electrician, mechanic, bricklayer or carpenter, could not qualify as practices under certain specified conditions. Electricians enjoying the intrinsic rewards supplied by knowledge and understanding of their field might be considered on an equal footing with particle physicists who value the unique intellectual rewards and life experience associated with their vocation. Indeed, the problem with many contemporary occupations is less their fundamental incompatibility with the concept of a practice than with their situation in a market economy culture emphasizing managerial reasoning and external goods at the expense of all other considerations. Furthermore, there is no reason why market economy efficiency must stand diametrically opposed to Goods Internal and the potential worker satisfaction they generate. Quite to the contrary, structuring work as a practice might actually enhance productivity since it arguably cultivates the internal motivation required to improve worker efficiency.<sup>5</sup>

Career education must revise its depiction of workplace structure to emphasize the importance of worker agency if it is to foster student appreciation for the Goods Internal related to work. To convey the idea of occupations as practices to students, career education programs must avoid portraying labor market conditions and

occupations as fixed, and explicitly recognize the legitimate right of workers to shape their vocational experience. A key element in employing virtue ethics as a vehicle to achieve character development objectives, then, is transforming depictions of work in career education from that of passively filling a job to actively pursuing a vocation. Career education programs might elucidate this distinction by employing Dewey's conception of a vocation as a form of work that recognizes the full intellectual and social implications of occupational experience:

A vocation means nothing but such a direction of life activities as renders them perceptibly significant to a person, because of the consequences they accomplish, and also useful to his associates. The opposite of a career is neither leisure nor culture, but aimlessness, capriciousness, the absence of cumulative achievement in experience.<sup>6</sup>

A vocation not only balances intellectual fulfilment with social responsibility, but comprises an essential ingredient to achieve both individual happiness and enhance productive efficiency. The idea that a vocation represents a personal calling where personal aptitude and interest are freely exercised appears generally overlooked in contemporary society since many students seemingly believe securing a job represents little more than a means to earn an income and pursue external goods. Dewey's concept of a vocation, on the other hand, embodies the sense of personal fulfilment, vocational purpose and social responsibility consistent with the Goods Internal related to a practice.

Joe Kinchloe, Patrick Slattery, and Shirley Steinberg propose a number of principles they believe distinguish jobs from vocations.<sup>7</sup> On their account, vocations include a reasonable measure of freedom from repetition and boredom, the opportunity to contribute to social welfare, freedom of expression and the right to influence working conditions. These ideals democratise vocational experience and encourage the necessary intellectual engagement required of workers in a practice by recognizing their right to co-construct workplace organization. Consistent with MacIntyre's idea of a practice and with democratic ideals, these principles depict work as an intellectually engaging personal and community good, rather than exclusively as a competition against other workers, companies and nations. It does not require an elitist conception of vocation to distinguish between autonomous work, whose end constitutes a freely-chosen personal goal, and heteronomous work whose objective is neither freely chosen, or personal. The art of carpentry might be as autonomously chosen and rewarding as a career in medicine when the former occupation is chosen on the basis of personal aptitude and interest, and reflects freely chosen objectives. To depict work as a practice in career education programs simply requires recognizing the cognitive dimension, intrinsic rewards, and community contribution of various vocational experiences.

It is necessary to reconsider what qualifies as a practice in MacIntyre's view since I wish to expand the scope of practices to include occupations seemingly rejected on his account. MacIntyre describes a practice as any sufficiently complex and coherent form of socially established cooperative activity from which Goods Internal may be derived. Goods Internal are identified by their unique connection to particular practices and by their general availability to other practitioners in a manner unlike external goods. Access to external goods is necessarily limited

through competition and property ownership, whereas Goods Internal can be theoretically extended to all community members. MacIntyre is otherwise unclear, however, on the specific qualities he believes a practice must include, relying instead on various examples to illustrate his position. He maintains without adequate or clear explanation, for example, that, “Bricklaying is not a practice; architecture is” (AV, 175).

MacIntyre’s distinction between bricklaying and architecture is apparently based on the assumed disparate level of cognitive complexity and established history between the two occupations. Unlike architecture, bricklaying, on his account, is automatically excluded from the realm of practices because the occupation merely requires the exercise of certain mechanical capacities. MacIntyre ultimately undermines his own judgment that bricklaying cannot qualify as a practice, however, by suggesting that only practitioners themselves are competent judges of the Goods Internal embodied within a practice. By his own criteria, without initiation into a specific occupation it is impossible to determine what, if any, Goods Internal are available to workers and hence to judge whether that occupation qualifies as a practice. Without sufficient knowledge of, and participation in, bricklaying, no definitive external judgement can be rendered on its status as a practice. For present purposes, then, the idea of practice will be extended to include occupations seemingly rejected on MacIntyre’s account.

#### CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT IN CONTEMPORARY CAREER EDUCATION

Contemporary career education programs commonly depict personal qualities as abstract technical capacities, employability skills or mere moral platitudes.<sup>8</sup> Under the heading Personal Management Skills, for example, the Conference Board of Canada’s *Employability Skills 2000 +* identifies the following personal qualities as desirable employability competencies: “deal with people, problems, and situations with honesty, integrity, and personal ethics.”<sup>9</sup> Simply portraying ethical values as occupational competencies fails to provide students with good reasons as to why adopting these qualities is vocationally important. Morally competent garage mechanics, architects, and bricklayers are not merely workers practicing employability skills, but people who practice honesty and reliability in their respective occupational roles for very particular reasons. The reasoning dimension of moral education can be respected, student agency fostered, and occupational behaviors more effectively shaped by considering how these various actions actually influence the workplace milieu. Indeed, the pedagogical challenge confronting career education is portraying desirable personal qualities in a manner enhancing student appreciation for their actual vocational and personal relevance.

Current techniques of character development in career education may succeed in temporarily shaping student behavior, but they are unlikely to create an enduring moral commitment to a coherent system of workplace ethics. Unless the desired behavioral traits are fully internalized into the value system of students, the character development objectives of career education are unlikely to be realized. Alfie Kohn argues, for example, that students must be afforded the opportunity to make sense of concepts such as fairness and courage based on their personal experiences. He

contends that drawing connections between specific character qualities and various concrete situations encourages students to internalize a moral decision-making framework.<sup>10</sup> MacIntyre's approach to virtue ethics successfully illuminates the concrete connections between qualities such as honesty, courage, trust and justice, and actual workplace situations.

#### VIRTUE ETHICS IN CAREER EDUCATION

MacIntyre believes that the virtues of justice, trust and honesty are constituent components of any practice offering Goods Internal. On his account, every practice requires a certain kind of relationship between practitioners and, "the virtues are those goods by reference to which, whether we like it or not, we define our relationships to those other people with whom we share the kind of purposes and standards which inform practices" (AV, 178). Relationships with fellow practitioners are summarily defined, then, by reference to the ethical standards of truthfulness, trust, justice, and courage. To violate these virtues not only excludes practitioners from procuring the Goods Internal, but corrupts the standards of excellence within the practice. In circumstances where virtues are routinely violated, the integrity of the entire practice risks total collapse.

Consider the example of restaurant manager Smith who treats employees on the basis of a subjective preference for certain personal characteristics rather than on standards of occupational excellence or job performance. The preferred employees receive additional working hours, more and better raises, and numerous other external rewards. Smith explains the disparate treatment to disgruntled employees by citing reasons other than those precipitating the unfair decisions. The job performance or personal characteristics of these employees might be questioned to mask the manager's actual motives. Within this hypothetical context, then, Smith violates the occupational virtues of truthfulness, trust and justice. In violating these virtues, the integrity of the manager's relationship with fellow practitioners is fundamentally damaged since, "their allegiance to each other in the pursuit of common goods has been put in question" (AV, 179). The virtue of justice requires treating other practitioners, in this case restaurant co-workers, on the basis of uniform and impersonal standards of excellence related to the vocation in question.

By violating the virtues of truthfulness, trust, and justice, Smith's professional relationship with the favored employees is defined differently from that with other workers. Ignoring these virtues also corrupts the standards of excellence within the restaurant by replacing them with subjective personal preferences. When impersonal standards of workplace excellence are ignored, it signals to restaurant employees that subjective preferences determine occupational reward rather than job performance. A breakdown in justice, honesty, and trust between workers, then, has far reaching consequences for the entire restaurant atmosphere since standards of workplace excellence are replaced by political pandering. Under such conditions, one might expect to witness escalating levels of cronyism with correspondingly less emphasis placed on impersonal standards of occupational excellence specific to the practice in question. Examples of this nature illustrate to students the important role of truth, honesty, and justice within actual workplace contexts. Although simply

conveying such stories alone might have little impact, encouraging students to role-play or conduct interviews with mistreated workers might prove very effective in demonstrating the importance of occupational virtue.

To participate in a practice requires accepting established standards of excellence, and reflective compliance with pre-existing rules, attitudes and behaviors. Indeed, to enter into a practice requires accepting the authority of these standards and the inadequacy of one's personal performance judged against them. *Employability Skills 2000 +* emphasizes such qualities as, "accept and provide feedback in a constructive and considerate manner" and "learn from your mistakes and accept feedback."<sup>11</sup> Situating these directives within the idea of work as a practice may reinforce for students the role played by constructive criticism in achieving standards of occupational excellence and Goods Internal. The virtues of justice, courage, and honesty are required not only in the treatment of other practitioners, but also to avoid delusions about one's own personal performance. MacIntyre reminds us that, "We have to learn to recognize what is due to whom; we have to be prepared to take whatever self-endangering risks are demanded along the way; and we have to listen carefully to what we are told about our own inadequacies" (AV, 178). Goods Internal are only realized by subordinating one's personal tastes and whims to the best standards heretofore achieved within a practice, and by listening attentively to formative criticisms about one's performance judged against them.

By preparing students for entry into occupations as practices the primary importance of quality standards in job performance, products, and customer service is effectively conveyed. MacIntyre emphasizes the importance of quality standards in a practice during his discussion of portrait painting: "There is first of all the excellence of the products, both the excellence in performance by the painters and that of each portrait itself. . . a practice involves standards of excellence" (AV, 177). Common complaints about students by employers such as charges of improper filing and basic mathematical errors more likely reflect worker inattention to quality standards than inadequate levels of academic preparation.<sup>12</sup> In fact, worker inattention to quality appears a prevailing concern in many contemporary employability skills policies and programs. *Employability Skills 2000 +*, for example, encourages students to "work to agreed quality standards and specifications" and "continuously monitor the success of a project or task and identify ways to improve."<sup>13</sup> *Career and Personal Planning* cites the importance of students demonstrating the "ability to meet performance standards of the workplace."<sup>14</sup> Standards of excellence unquestionably differ in a technical sense from one vocation to another, but promoting student recognition of their inter-occupational significance might be achieved by emphasizing the intrinsic rewards derived from pursuing excellence in virtually all occupations recognized as practices.

I previously alluded to the idea that recognizing work as a practice might enhance productivity by improving general worker satisfaction. There may be other ways that recognizing work as a practice can improve worker efficiency, and hence benefit both employers and employees more generally. Workers sensitive to standards of occupational excellence and striving to maintain them are apt to achieve

superior levels of customer satisfaction than those businesses less concerned with such standards. A short order cook respecting the standards of excellence associated with food preparation such as aesthetic presentation, consistency of production and hygienic product handling is far more likely to engender customer loyalty than cooks with sloppy work habits in these areas. Similarly, a food server striving to meet standards of excellence will provide a superior level of customer service compared to workers less concerned with these crucial occupational objectives. When standards of excellence are met in food serving, it not only affects access to Goods Internal, but may also impact on securing external goods in the form of received gratuities. Customers satisfied through the pursuit of occupational excellence by workers in a practice are potentially repeat customers and hence there are obvious benefits to all concerned.

A career education program helping students recognize various occupations as practices, then, could make a significant contribution to business, students as future workers and society in general. Without being practitioners themselves, students may not be able to grasp the full force of the Goods Internal different vocations offer, but at least they will appreciate such goods are available by pursuing specific occupational virtues. The opportunities for innovation in career education programs abound as various vocational opportunities from those in the hospitality industry to medicine, the arts and academics could be explored by students as potential practices. By interviewing workers who are seasoned practitioners, students could identify various standards of workplace excellence and discuss the occupational virtues required to enjoy the Goods Internal afforded by many different vocations.

#### CONCLUSION

Regardless of the format chosen, the objective of a virtue ethics strategy in character education would be to enhance student understanding of how occupational behaviors influence vocational experience while also respecting the reasoning dimension of moral education. A preliminary list of occupational virtues includes:

1. Recognize the importance of truthfulness, justice, and trust between co-workers, supervisors, and managers;
2. Identify the highest standards of excellence in job performance, provision of services or products, and seek to achieve and maintain them;
3. Understand how corrupting the standards of occupational excellence can affect workers, the working environment, customer service, and workplace efficiency;
4. Accept feedback from experienced co-workers and managers on personal inadequacies judged against established standards of workplace excellence;
5. Learn to appreciate the unique goods internal derived from different forms of work and understand what personal qualities and workplace structures are required to achieve them.

Whether students enter the labor force as hospitality workers or pursue professional careers in medicine, fostering their appreciation for occupational virtue would render career education programs a worthwhile component of secondary level and



adult career education. Contemporary career education programs portray various ethical qualities as moral platitudes, technical skills, or workplace competencies, an approach to values instruction that potentially undermines the rational dimension of democratic education and one likely to prove pedagogically ineffective. A character development strategy emphasizing occupational virtue and recognizing work as a practice, on the other hand, conveys qualities such as honesty, trust, and justice to students in a manner where their vocational importance becomes evident, moral reasoning is respected and the opportunity for internalization of these qualities is exponentially enhanced.

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1. For example, California Department of Education, *School to Career Plan* <<http://www.stc.cahwnet.gov/default.asp>> (12 October 2001); Michigan Department of Education, *Career and Employability Skills* <<http://cdp.mde.state.mi.us/mcf/contentstandards/careeremployability/default.html>> (14 October 2001); New Jersey Department of Education, *Cross Content and Workplace Readiness* <<http://www.state.nj.us/njded/cccs/05ccwready.html>> (18 October 2001); and Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, *Guidance and career education* <<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/curricul/secondary/guidance/guidful.html>> (01 November 2001).

2. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916), 11.

3. Emotivism is the non-cognitivist metaethical view that moral judgments are merely expressive of subjective or personal preferences. For a further discussion of emotivist assumptions see, for example, Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1952), 102-14.

4. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 94. For all subsequent references, this text will be cited as *AV*.

5. For example, Andrew Mason, "MacIntyre on Modernity and How it has Marginalized the Virtues," in *How Should One Live?* ed. Roger Crisp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

6. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 307.

7. Joe L. Kinchloe, Patrick Slattery, and Shirley R. Steinberg, *Contextualizing Teaching* (New York: Longman, 2000), 176-80.

8. See footnote #1 for examples.

9. Conference Board of Canada, *Employability Skills 2000* + <<http://www2.conferenceboard.ca/nbec/pdf/esp2000.pdf>> (09 October 2001).

10. Alfie Kohn, "How Not to Teach Values," in *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Education*, ed. James Wm. Noll (Guildford: Dushkin/McGraw Hill, 2001).

11. <<http://www2.conferenceboard.ca/nbec/pdf/esp2000.pdf>> (09 October 2001).

12. For example, G. Debling and Behrman, *Employability Skills for BC* <<http://www.aett.gov.bc.ca/employability/analysis/toc.htm>> (10 October 2001).

13. <<http://www2.conferenceboard.ca/nbec/pdf/esp2000.pdf>> (09 October 2001).

14. Ministry of Education, *Career and Personal Planning Curriculum 8 to 12* (Victoria: Ministry of Education, 1995), 7.