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Moral Education in the 21st Century, edited by Douglas Yacek, Mark Jonas, and Kevin Gary, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023

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Review of

Moral Education in the 21ˢᵗ Century

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Moral Education in the 21ˢᵗ Century, edited by Douglas Yacek, Mark Jonas and Kevin Gary, is a compendium of current research into the theory and practice of moral education in contemporary democratic societies. Primarily aimed at teachers and educational researchers, it seeks to facilitate philosophical reflection on the salience of moral education in helping young people develop the reliable dispositions necessary for *grappling well* with the "thorny issues" and "moral hazards" that they will inevitably face. Given that the educational environment is inescapably value-laden, meaning that the question is not *if* we should morally educate but *how*, the book further aims to broadly guide educators in making wise decisions about moral educational methods and tools. In doing so, it is hoped that educators will be better equipped to help actualise students' ability to flourish.

The book is composed of 17 original chapters written by both established and emerging scholars in the field. Part I lays the historical groundwork by illuminating the contemporary significance of Plato, Aristotle, the Sceptics, Nietzsche and Kant to moral education. Part II introduces some relatively new additions to the landscape of moral education, such as the capability approach, care ethics, non-deal virtue theory and pragmatism. In a bid to prepare students for the moral challenges of today, Part III directly addresses specific issues connected to virtual spaces, consumerism, sex education, democratic disagreement and boredom.

This is an impressive and ambitious volume that deftly straddles the fine line between philosophical depth and accessibility. The contributions collectively make a strong case for the necessity of moral education for living a meaningful and flourishing life, and individually bring rigour and practical wisdom to discussions of how moral education might be understood and, importantly, taught. Although not stated explicitly by the editors, the volume can be taken to be sympathetic to a broadly virtue-ethical approach to moral education, with a significant number of contributions advocating this approach or at least ideas that are compatible with it. To me, this is a clear strength, and one that could potentially have added even more internal cohesion to the volume had it been made more visible. I expect, though, that this was a deliberate omission given the number of volumes dedicated to neo-Aristotelian character education already in circulation (e.g., Darnell & Kristjánsson, 2020; Matthews & Lerner, 2024), perhaps to the exclusion of other theoretical voices. A further strength is the volume's commitment to the fact that education is not morally neutral. Indeed, early on in the volume the editors emphasise the inherently normative—or in their words "value-laden" (p. 2)—nature of education itself, meaning that education cannot be disentangled from moral education. If this is the case, and I agree that it is, then the volume serves as a call for *all* educators and educational researchers to take moral education seriously, by thinking more formally about how they might best help students to develop the ethical dispositions necessary for them to flourish.

Given the significant number of chapters in the book, rather than giving a detailed evaluation of each contribution, I will instead treat them selectively, by zooming in on particularly promising insights. Specifically, I will home in on three contributions, one from each section of the book, that I consider to be especially helpful in advancing teachers' and educational researchers' understanding and practice of moral education in the 21st century.

First, Mark Jonas's contribution, "Neo-Aristotelianism and Moral Education" (pp. 25–48), is the ideal theoretical introduction to the practical incarnation of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics: neo-Aristotelian character education. Particularly compelling is the way in which Jonas synthesises the central tenets of this approach, which are a great resource for both informed and novice readers, with a focus on friendships of virtue, an oft-neglected but nonetheless developmentally important aspect of Aristotelian thought. As key sources of influence on young people, Jonas argues that friendships of virtue—in this case peer-to-peer friendships where each party facilitates virtue-cultivation in the other—ought to have a more prominent place in moral education. Indeed, he, I think rightly, claims that the intensity, desire and trust involved in close friendships enables a deep sense of shared commitment to (objective) virtue (p. 37). Yet Jonas is not naïve about the possibility of such friendships going awry, and suggests that this virtue-seeking process requires guidance from teachers who provide virtue-supportive classroom environments and also serve as role models to emulate. Furthermore, seeking to be more optimistic about individual moral progress and change than a typical exegesis of Aristotle would allow (Aristotle was famously sceptical about the possibility of becoming a *phronimos* for anyone not habituated in virtue from early childhood), he then adds a sprinkling of neo-Platonism to the mix by highlighting the importance of morally transformative experiences—epiphanies—to moral education. Indeed, since the autonomous practice of virtue requires a prior habituation in virtue, Jonas argues that moral epiphanies are required to rehabituate those not already on the path to virtue and prepare them for friendships of virtue. I am essentially convinced by Jonas's argument, but wonder if he underestimates the ability of teachers to stimulate habituated virtue in their students through, for example, virtue-directed praise and constructive critique, which are already present in the methodological toolkit of good teachers. Further, as he concedes (p. 39), moral epiphanies are by no means guaranteed, which calls into question their reliability as a developmental method.

Second, Lorella Terzi's contribution "The Capability Approach as a Foundation for Moral Education" (pp. 136–150) seamlessly expounds how moral education can attend to social justice by preparing responsible moral agents for the demands of democratic life focused on freedom of opportunity for both themselves and others. Paying particular attention to Sen's account of the capability approach (1985, 1992), whilst also citing Nussbaum's (2000) and Robeyns's (2017) versions, Terzi makes visible how freedom to achieve well-being is of primary moral import. For those not familiar with the capability approach—a theoretical framework used to evaluate well-being in terms of capabilities (opportunities to achieve functionings) and functionings (actualised doings and beings) that people have reason to value—this is an excellent resource. She illuminates the fundamental role schooling in general plays in securing the essential functionings needed for a child's well-being and for their future abilities for democratic agency in pluralistic societies (p. 141). In particular, she argues that helping students develop their skills of deliberation, discussion and critical reasoning is essential for respecting and enacting their own and others' future freedom by preparing them to challenge unjust institutional arrangements. As such, since schooling is inherently an institutional arrangement, she suggests it too ought to be a place where democratic values are enacted and taught, both in everyday interactions and in the curriculum (p. 147). I am most persuaded by Terzi's addition to the landscape of moral education. She acknowledges the proposal's limits—it being concerned with "resolving and improving existing problems" and thus being a supplementary, rather than full, theory of moral education (p. 144)—whilst demonstrating how capabilities aimed at participation in civic life are fundamental to well-being. Her argument is illustrated with poignant examples throughout. This contribution could be further enhanced by the inclusion of some more specific ideas as to how this application of the capability approach might play out in educational practice.

Third, Rachel Siow Robertson and Matthew Kuan Johnson's contribution "Moral Education in and for Virtual Spaces" (pp. 231–259) offers readers much food for thought and practical guidance as to the opportunities and challenges associated with virtual technologies. What makes the topic particularly urgent, the authors argue, is the increasing interplay between what is "virtual" and "real," meaning that what was once a dualistic relationship is no longer the case, and that virtues and vices learnt both online and offline affect adjacent spaces (p. 231). Ultimately, Robertson and Johnson see virtual spaces as potential learning ground for flourishing in the real and virtual world. They specifically ground their theorising in virtue ethics, and, in line with this tradition's underpinning of methodological naturalism, align and extend such theorising with empirical insights derived both from what is factually known about virtual technologies and from their own personal experience. Whilst the latter is generally a philosophically shaky foundation for argument, these authors are expert "end-users," which makes this anecdotal move compelling. Their approach can be taken to go beyond existing responses to virtual ethics education for three central reasons. First, their scope includes a wide breadth of spaces that encourage interactivity, such as virtual information sharing platforms, virtual social connection platforms and virtual habit formation apps, meaning their focus is relevant to the ordinary use of technology by most pupils (p. 233). Second, employing a specifically virtue-ethical approach to education *for and in* virtual spaces provides helpful guidance by enabling them to advocate for "technomoral" or "cyber" virtues—that is, acquired stable traits of character specifically concerned with individual online conduct yet importantly also aimed at "collective moral wisdom on a global scale" (p. 235). Arguably, this goes beyond the traditional focus on present individual action common to consequentialist and deontological responses to virtual technologies. Third, they take seriously the structural constraints that can hinder individual technomoral progress by impacting the integrity of end-users, such as epistemic barriers to knowledge in the form of prohibitively expensive paywalls for journal access or biased algorithms that promote misinformation (pp. 237–246). The result is a technologically comprehensive and philosophically discerning resource for educators and researchers seeking normative guidance on how to bring offline and online worlds into better, flourishing-conducive alignment.

Whilst, for reasons of space, I have confined myself to just three of the contributions to the volume, many others are equally merit-worthy—clear evidence of the overall quality of *Moral Education in the 21st Century*. I am, however, left with a question regarding its theoretical breadth. How might educators go about discerning which of the many—often theoretically incompatible—approaches reflected in the volume to apply? In short, since the theoretical commitments of the contributions are relatively diverse, the uninformed reader might be tempted to pick-and-mix conflicting ideas, which threatens to engender a philosophically unsophisticated approach to moral education. Perhaps some further guidance as to which contributions are commensurable would be helpful, or perhaps it is better framed as a resource for researchers already skilled at making these important distinctions. Nevertheless, as a compendium of current research in moral education, it is outstanding.

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