

Abstract

Contrary to the claim of Lawrence Kohlberg that moral virtues are arbitrary standards of character because virtue words lack descriptive content, it is argued that the moral virtues and judgement are indispensible to one another and to the development of moral character. The case is made by a careful analysis of the concepts *habit* and *virtue*. It is shown that virtues are not habits, that some virtues are forms of self-control, and that those which are entail right judgement and therein describe moral character.

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Moral Education, Moral Character, and the Virtues

To what extent do the virtues form an indispensable part of moral education? According to Lawrence Kohlberg the less we do in attempting to inculcate the virtues the better is our programme of moral education. This somewhat un-Victorian sentiment does not belie some passion for vice, but rather reflects Kohlberg's view that any traditional form of character education is liable to be arbitrary. One reason which Kohlberg believes supports this charge of arbitrariness is his claim that virtue words have no descriptive content. He says, for example, that "words like honesty are actually used primarily to praise or blame other people, not to describe cognitively in the scientific sense."¹ If virtue words do indeed lack descriptive content, then disagreements over whether a given action manifests one particular character trait rather than another reflects nothing but different appraisals of a given action. Thus for one person what is a manifestation of the virtue of integrity is for another a manifestation of stubbornness; what for one is an example of honesty in expressing his true feeling towards others is for yet another an expression of insensitivity towards the feeling of others.² Character education when viewed solely as the teaching of the virtues is an arbitrary enterprise for Kohlberg, since it persuades children to adopt specific forms of behaviour, not by enhancing their capacities for rational choice, but by using the praise and blame inherent in the use of virtue and vice words. Character education does not provide the means for showing why the prescribed behaviour is choice-worthy.

What is behind Kohlberg's claim that virtue words have no descriptive content? Kohlberg finds support for his views in the Hartshorne-May studies whose findings Kohlberg says "suggest that the most influential factors determining resistance to temptation to cheat or disobey are situational factors rather than a fixed individual moral character trait of honesty."³ Two findings which allow for this conclusion are: (a) "low predictability of cheating in one situation for cheating in another", (b) children were found not to be divisible into "cheaters" and "honest children" for their "cheating scores were distributed in bell-curve fashion around an average score of moderate cheating".⁴ But how do these findings support the view that virtue words are descriptively empty? Kohlberg says that one "prevalent interpretation of ... moral character ... is that it is a set of general 'good habits'...."⁵ Since virtue words describe character by referring to a person's habits, in ascribing a virtue to a person one would expect to be able to predict across a variety of situations the sort of behaviour he or she would engage in. The finding of low predictability suggests to Kohlberg that the determinants of behaviour have nothing to do with moral character as described by traditional virtue words. Moreover, if virtue words describe moral

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habits, then bell-curve distributions of moral behaviour would be the last thing one would expect, just as one would not expect a bell-curve distribution of *habitual* cigarette smoking although such smoking can range from the habitual to the infrequent. Since moral habits have nothing to do with determining moral behaviour, the virtue words which describe such habits are devoid of explanatory significance.

Although Kohlberg claims that the “virtue” conception of moral character has hardly any virtue left to it at all, this does not mean that he rejects all conceptions of moral character. Indeed, he says that an analysis of the Hartshorne-May data indicates that while “most of the variation in cheating seems due to reactions to the individual situations, part is a product of stable individual differences in attitudes toward classroom cheating.”⁶ If moral character still has a part to play in our conceptions of moral behaviour and moral education, how is it to be construed? Kohlberg claims that ego-strength variables correlate well with moral behaviour; that is, variables like self-control, self-esteem and the capacity for anticipating future events correlate well with such things as resistance to cheating. In so far as terms like “self-control” describe a person’s character, these trait terms describe a person’s capacity for decision making rather than fixed behaviour traits.⁷ For Kohlberg, moral character consists in those intellectual traits which are relevant to decision making but not in the traditional moral virtues.

Any attempt to find a place for the moral virtues within the domain of moral education, simply has to take account of Kohlberg’s important and influential arguments against their relevance. While I think Kohlberg is right in saying that there are important intellectual character traits connected with decision making, I think he is wrong in concluding that the moral virtues have no significance in the description of moral character. I believe that the chief source of his devaluation of the moral virtues is his assumption that they are habits. I shall advance several arguments against this assimilation and show how, once we release the virtues from the grip of habit, the experimental evidence Kohlberg brings against them no longer supports his case. This, however, will not restore the virtues to their importance in our understanding of moral character—it only forestalls one attack against them. To provide the needed restoration then, I shall argue that the moral virtues (or at least some of them) can best be viewed as forms of self-control. This leads to the happy irony that whatever evidence Kohlberg adduces to show that self-control is a relevant feature of a person’s moral character also shows that the moral virtues are equally relevant.

Virtues and Habits

Consider the following examples of character traits: (a) talkative, (b) honest, (c) obedient. Although each of these is a character trait in that they can be used to describe the sort of person someone is, they differ in that (a) is a habit, (b) is a moral virtue and (c) is a morally ambiguous trait. To know that a person has any of the above traits requires some manifestation of them in action. The talkative person talks too much, whereas “honest”, and “obedient” characterize acts as well as persons. Saying that being talkative is a habit where being honest or obedient is not, marks important differences between types of character trait and the way in which actions serve as manifestations of a particular type of trait. Consider for example how talking as a manifestation of the habit of talkativeness differs from talking as a manifestation of the morally ambiguous trait of obedience. When an instance of talking is the manifestation of a habit, it is an instance of a single type of action. The talkative person is one who frequently engages in the same type of action, i.e. talking. On the other hand when an instance of talking is a manifestation of obedience it is so because the action is undertaken in compliance with commands issued by someone in authority. Manifestations of a trait like obedience do not require that the agent perform only one single type of action. Indeed, in manifesting obedience an agent may perform a variety of actions which belong to

different and incompatible types of action, e.g. talking, being quiet, sitting, standing, etc. What brings unity to the various manifestations of obedience is compliance and not the type of action engaged in. What brings unity to the various manifestations of habit like talkativeness is that each manifestation belongs to a single type of action. One way of expressing the difference between traits which are habits and those which are not, is to say that those traits which are habits are "action-consistent"⁸ whereas those traits which are not habits are "action-variable."

If Kohlberg is correct in viewing moral virtues as habits, then they should be action-consistent. However, it seems best to view a trait like honesty as action-variable for honest people do not necessarily engage in one single type of action. It may be a mark of a person's honesty that he or she frequently takes other people's money out of the bank (e.g. if acting as an agent for them). On the other hand it may be manifested by frequently putting other people's money into the bank. What makes these actions manifestations of honesty is not the type of action engaged in, for these too could be the actions of someone who is thoroughly dishonest. Honestly like obedience may manifest itself in various types of action. What gives these various manifestations of honesty a unity (i.e. as all belonging to the same trait) is not the type of action frequently engaged in, but something else. Similarly, other moral virtues (e.g. courage and temperance), are best viewed as action-variable and thus cannot be construed as habits.

In support of Kohlberg however, perhaps we can throw our descriptive net sufficiently far so as to capture something which could presumably (but only presumably) act as a single type of action while clearly serving as a necessary manifestation of honesty. Could we not say for example, that any honest person necessarily refrains from taking what belongs to others? Would this not make this trait like any habit in being action-consistent? Although one might raise a fuss over whether "refraining from taking what belongs to others" describes a single type of action which encapsulates every action which can be described as "honest", there are other features of habit-traits which disallow construing the moral virtues as habits. These features are connected with the logic of trait ascription. When a trait is also a habit, we can ascribe such a trait to a person if and only if a single type of action is frequently manifested. If a person is talkative, critical or boastful, then we can infer that he or she frequently talks, criticizes, or boasts. Also if a person is frequently talking, criticizing, or boasting, this is sufficient to infer that the person is talkative, critical, or boastful.⁹ In the case of a moral virtue the inference pattern is somewhat different. For while we might allow inferences from the trait to the claim that the person refrains from taking what belongs to others, the inference from such restraint to the trait is not permissible. After all, refraining from taking what belongs to others may be due to other traits such as obedience or timidity rather than honesty. Moreover direct inferences from a trait which is also a moral virtue to a presumptively single type of action provides increasingly little in the way of descriptive power, to the extent that our descriptive net becomes wider and wider so as to encapsulate everything that might count as an action which stems from the virtue. Although it is invariably true that honest people perform honest actions, this does not inform us as to what people do when acting honestly. But if we do not construe moral virtues as habits, then actions which are manifestations of these virtues are not, as are the manifestations of habits, inferable from the traits alone. Whatever descriptive content virtue words have, they do not get it from allowing direct, informative inferences to a single type of action.

So far I have argued that habits and moral virtues differ in their inference patterns in at least two respects. But there is yet another difference between virtues and habits which is connected with the frequency of manifestation. Suppose we take "refraining from taking what belongs to others" as an acceptable candidate for a single type of action which stands as the manifestation of the trait of honesty. But if this is to count as a manifestation of a

habit, it has to manifest itself with a sufficient frequency. Although there are variations in our standards of what is frequent, by whatever measure we have, the more frequent the manifestation, the more firmly a habit has been established. Yet when it comes to a virtue like honesty, if someone has to frequently exercise restraint when faced with someone else's property, we might very well conclude that that person is not very secure in his or her honesty. Similarly with courage. If a person frequently has to struggle against the temptation to give into fear, then we should conclude that the virtue of courage is certainly not very well secured. Although it may be the case that for some virtues (e.g. benevolence and justice) frequency of manifestation does not tell against the weakness of moral character, it does with some. This, I think, would be sufficient to show that we cannot blithely classify all virtues as habits. Indeed, if we combine this argument from frequency with all the others I have given, I think we can claim that no virtues can be regarded as habits.

How do the various differences between habits and the moral virtues, undermine Kohlberg's use of the Hartshorne-May data? Consider first of all Kohlberg's use of the finding that there was very little predictability as to whether a child would cheat or not. Such results would allow us to infer from a sufficiently high frequency of cheating behaviour to the non-existence of honesty in that person. But Kohlberg wants to do more since he concludes that virtue words are descriptively useless because they do not allow us to predict behaviour across situations. But the only prediction one can make from the trait of honesty which would carry across all situations, is the rather uninformative one that there would be a high frequency of honest actions. But if moral virtues are action-variable traits and the action taken by an agent is situation specific, then the descriptive content of virtue words when used to describe a person's moral character does not amount to describing what a person would tend to do across situations. The Hartshorne-May data do perhaps allow the conclusion that the children tested were not honest, but not the conclusion that virtue words do not have any descriptive use at all when used to describe moral character. Since the virtues are not habits they do not attempt to describe character by being covert descriptions of frequent behaviour. Moreover, just as the Hartshorne-May findings do not disestablish the descriptive function of the virtues neither could they have established it if it had turned out that there was a high frequency of honest behaviour in the children tested. Since virtues are not habits and thus do not share the same inference pattern, we cannot successfully infer from such frequent behaviour the conclusion that the children were indeed honest.

Suppose we now consider Kohlberg's use of another Hartshorne-May finding, *viz.*, that "cheating scores were distributed in bell-curve fashion around an average score of moderate cheating". From this finding he concludes that since we cannot divide people into those who are "cheaters" and those who are "honest", these trait characterizations are not very useful. Of course if virtues and vices are habits then we would expect that having a certain trait would entail conclusions about the frequency of actions which are their manifestations. But as I tried to point out the relation between a given moral trait and the frequency of manifestation depends upon what virtue we are considering and the sort of description given to it. Obviously frequent behaviour which is described as "cheating" is incompatible with being honest. But frequent behaviour which is described as "honest" or "dishonest" tells us nothing about what the agent did nor does the logic of trait ascription permit an inference to the trait. Furthermore, if "honest" behaviour is described in terms of restraining oneself, the frequency of the behaviour so described may indeed point to the lack of the trait. Kohlberg's assimilation of virtues and vices to habits has once again led to conclusions which are unwarranted by the experimental evidence.

Virtues and Self-Control

If the virtues do not describe moral character by indicating a person's habits, how do they

function? Although the virtues do manifest themselves in action, since they are action-variable traits no one single type of action serves to define a given virtue. In this section, I shall argue that we can best construe the virtues (or at least some of them) not as dispositions to act in a single type of way but as forms of self-control. As I have already pointed out, such a conclusion would sit happily with Kohlberg's conception of moral character and restore the virtues to an important place in the description of moral character.

Suppose we consider the sort of circumstances under which the virtues are required to manifest themselves in action. Going shopping in London, Ontario does not ordinarily require courage but in Belfast it might. Similarly, to ask a wealthy person to deposit a few dollars of another person's money in a bank, does not stand as a salute to his honesty. But if the person were in impoverished circumstances, and needed money to pay a debt, for him to place another person's money in the bank would indeed require honesty. In these cases the actions taken are not in themselves courageous or honest, but take on this characterization because of the special circumstances under which the action was done. What makes going shopping a courageous act in Belfast but not in London, Ontario, is that in Belfast, but not in London, one has to overcome one's fear in the face of danger. In the case which dealt with honesty, depositing someone's money is regarded as calling for honesty when the person has to overcome a desire for someone else's property. In both these cases a virtue is called for in order to overcome some emotion or desire.

There is yet another circumstance relevant to the manifestation of a virtue. This is connected with judgements about right action. If in the case of shopping in Belfast, there was no need to obtain any goods from a store and the danger was considerable, if a person still went shopping then the action would no doubt be regarded as foolhardy rather than courageous. Similarly, a necessary condition for regarding the action of depositing someone else's money in a bank, as an honest one, is that the action be the right one. If right judgement is necessary to the exercise of a virtue then Kohlberg is certainly wrong in separating the moral virtues from our capacities for rational decision making.

In the case of courage a person has to overcome his or her fear in the face of danger in order to do the right action. The virtue of honesty is exercised whenever the desire to take someone else's property has to be overcome. If these stand as definitions of each of these virtues, then they are not to be characterized in terms of a single type of action, but rather in terms of a capacity to overcome various passions (i.e. desires and emotions) which often-time obscure our judgments about what is the right thing to do. They are differentiated in terms of the specific passion which needs overcoming, but insofar as something needs overcoming in order for a person to exercise judgment, these virtues can certainly be regarded as forms of self-control.¹⁰ If then Kohlberg is right in saying that moral character can be described in terms of a person's capacity for self-control, then at least two of the traditional virtues are also capable of describing moral character and are therefore far from being empty of descriptive meaning.

Can the view that some of the virtues can be defined in terms of a capacity for self-control, be extended to cover all the virtues? It certainly can cover the virtue of temperance since the latter involves overcoming excessive desire for certain pleasures. However, the virtue of justice seems more problematical and has led von Wright to conclude that it is not a virtue since it does not fit the conceptual pattern of a virtue.¹¹ On the other hand one might argue that since being fair requires overcoming exclusive pre-occupation with self-interest, not only does it fit in as a version of self-control, but that because it concerns itself with the interests of others it is the only distinctively *moral* virtue. However, answers to these questions cannot be settled until we have worked out an appropriate taxonomy of the virtues. All I have wanted to do here is to show that at least some of the virtues are features of moral character and that they have a close connection

with the development of judgment.

Moral Education and the Virtues

Kohlberg's assimilation of the virtues to habits of action has obscured an important element in moral education by leading us to an unjustifiable separation of morally relevant cognitive development from the development of the moral virtues. The development of the latter is important if we are to enable children to overcome the obscuring force that the passions have upon our judgments as to what is the right thing to do. Without the virtues and their development it is difficult to see how appropriate judgments can ever be made. On the other hand, without the development of moral judgment it is difficult to see how the virtues could ever come to be exercised since to say a virtue has been exercised requires a right judgment. The moral virtues and moral judgment are indispensable to one another and to the morally educated person. Whether the virtues can be taught however is another matter entirely.

Résumé

Contrairement à Lawrence Kohlberg qui prétend que les vertus morales sont des standards arbitraires parce que les mots qui les désignent manquent de contenu descriptif, nous croyons que les vertus morales et le jugement moral sont indispensables l'un à l'autre et indispensables au développement du caractère moral. Nous nous basons sur une analyse soignée des concepts d' "habitude" et de "vertu" et prétendons que les vertus ne sont pas des habitudes, que certaines vertus sont des formes d'auto-contrôle et que celles qui le sont permettent un jugement correct et déterminent ainsi le caractère moral.

Footnotes

¹L. Kohlberg, "Stages of Moral Development as a Basis for Moral Education" in *Moral Education: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, (eds.) C. M. Beck, et. al. (University of Toronto Press, 1971), pp. 75-76.

²L. Kohlberg and R. Mayer, "Development as the Aim of Moral Education", *Harvard Educational Review*, 42 (1972), p. 479.

³L. Kohlberg, "Development of Moral Character and Moral Ideology" in M. L. Hoffman (ed.), *Review of Child Development Research*, Vol. 1, (Russell Sage Foundation, 1964), p. 386.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.* p. 388.

⁶*Ibid.* p. 387.

⁷*Ibid.* p. 391.

⁸The term "action-consistent" in referring to traits, comes from William P. Alston's "Towards a Logical Geography of Personality: Traits and Deeper Lying Personality Characteristics" in *Mind, Science and History* (eds.) H. E. Kiefer and M. K. Munitz (State University of New York; 1970), p. 69. To regard trait-habits as action-consistent seems to be the same as Ryle's view that habits are single track dispositions. See his *The Concept of Mind* (Hutchinson: 1949), p. 46.

⁹At least two conditions must be met before we can legitimately infer from frequently occurring actions to the claim that they stem from a trait which is a habit. These are (a) that the frequently occurring actions are of a single type and (b) that these actions are occurring in normal circumstances. We could not, for example legitimately infer from frequent exhibitions of talking to the claim that the person engaging in such chatter is talkative if it were the case that such talking was part of his or her profession.

¹⁰This formulation is due to G. H. von Wright. See his *The Varieties of Goodness* (Routledge and Kegan Paul: 1963), Chapter VII, pp. 146-149.

¹¹von Wright *Ibid.* p. 149.