Race, Virtue, and Moral Education

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The moral education and character education movements in the United States are quite strong. But literature in these areas pays very little attention to racial issues. Thomas Lickona's influential *Educating for Character* briefly mentions racial bigotry and the need to educate to reduce it, and also briefly learning respect for different cultures as a worthy goal of moral education.[1] But in 420 pages, that is virtually the only attention race receives. James Davison Hunter's *Death of Character* mentions race only to reassure the reader that white, black, and Hispanic children do not have different moral values: "There simply is no African-American take on honesty."[2] Larry Nucci's *Education in the Moral Domain* is sensitive to issues of cultural difference in values, and to social exclusion in general, but does not mention race specifically, thereby at least implying that race does not raise any distinctive issues of social exclusion, or of group-based values.[3] Kevin Ryan, a pioneer in the field of character education, makes no mention of race in his *Building Character in Schools: Practical Ways to Bring Moral Instruction to Life* (with Karen Bohlin).[4]

At the same time, I have noticed in one instance (and I have the impression of more), what seems a deliberate use of non-white examples to illustrate general positions in moral or character education. The message here seems similar to Davison Hunter's view that there are no important racial differences when it comes to morality. For example, Kevin Ryan, in the book just mentioned, cites as one of two moral exemplars, a poor uneducated black woman who managed to save $150,000, and at age 87 gave this money for scholarships for young African-American students.[5] Here race seems to me to be employed to validate a transracial ethic. I have no problem with transracial values; but I also think race plays a role as a distinct desideratum in the moral domain. Some of morality is itself concerned with race, and members of different racial groups are differently positioned with respect to those moral/racial concerns.

This absence of explicit attention in the moral/character education literature to what is surely one of the primary moral fault lines in U.S. American life seems remarkable to me. In the remainder of this paper, I want to do two things. The first is to suggest some explanations for why racial issues might be coming in "under the radar" of moral educators — or at least why they do not seem of an appropriate character to theorize in treatises on moral education. These explanations concern conceptualizations of the fields of moral philosophy and moral education, as well as the ways that race is thought of as a moral issue. I suggest alternative ways of thinking about the moral domain that more readily allow for race-related virtues. I will also suggest some further explanations for why moral educators themselves, such as classroom teachers, might shy away from incorporating racial issues into their teaching; these explanations may or may not be influencing the moral education theorists.

My second goal is to suggest two examples of race-related virtues, beyond the mere absence of the vice of racial prejudice. In doing so, I will draw in part on my experience teaching a course on "race and racism" at my local high school, to a racially and ethnically diverse group of 17- and 18-year-olds. These young people use a rich moral vocabulary to come to terms with race-related issues of deep concern to them. Their concerns suggest that the intersection of race and morality is more extensive than one might think, and that moral education would do well to find a way to incorporate this broader range of concerns into its theory and practice.

The field of character education is allegedly grounded in what, within moral philosophy, would be regarded as a "virtue" approach. "Moral education," by contrast, is generally thought to be particularly concerned with moral reasoning and judgment, and perhaps with action stemming from such judgment. Moral education is often allied with deontological approaches in ethics. Virtue approaches, by contrast (with consequentialist ethics as well) involve greater concern with the full moral psychology of the moral agent. Being a virtuous agent involves not only conforming one's behavior to certain rules or principles, but having appropriate emotional responses, utilizing moral imagination, engaging one's perceptual capacities, and the like. In practice, character education has not always found a way to teach virtues in this psychologically rich sense, and some education that goes under the name of "character education" is not appreciably different from the attempt to get students to see why certain values (stated in virtue terms, such as "honesty," "justice," and "compassion") are good. Thus, in practice, moral education and character education are not always sharply distinct. One particular very non-philosophical reason worth noting why the practice of character education may diverge from its virtuist philosophical underpinning is that, at least in the United States, character education is the rubric or label under which programs get funded. More than half the states have "character education" mandates for their schools. This provides a powerful incentive for anyone with a program that is broadly moral, or civic, in nature to put itself forward as character education.

In understanding how the field of moral education thinks about or leaves a place for racial concerns, it is nevertheless helpful to look at virtue approaches in moral philosophy. Some of the limitations in relation to race thereby uncovered will be applicable to practices that go under the name of character education but are not strictly virtuist in their educational approach. Most philosophical literature on the virtues appears to proceed on the assumption that we already know what all the virtues and vices are; that they are generally represented by single words — honesty, cruelty, hypocrisy, compassion, and so on — and that what the virtues are recognized to be has not much changed in hundreds, even thousands, of years.[6] Linda Zagzebski is particularly forthright on this score:

> Those qualities that have appeared on the greatest number of lists of the virtues in different places and in different times in history are, in fact, virtues. These qualities would probably include such traits as wisdom, courage, benevolence, justice, honesty, loyalty, integrity, and generosity.[7]

True, this is not absolutely inconsistent with there being other virtues. But I think it fair to say that most contemporary writers on the virtues make the at least tacit

assumption that all the virtues, or at least the important ones, have already been marked out for us by our current terms designating virtues. When a general point about virtue is being made, these "standard issue" virtues are always the ones chosen in illustration.

However, if a (moral) virtue is an excellence of character, why could there not be many virtues and vices that are not on the standard lists, and that are not able to be deignated by a single term or two? Why, and this is a separate point, could there not be virtues (or vices) that have come to be recognized only fairly recently, or, indeed, have come to *be* virtues (or vices) only fairly recently? Finally, could there be virtues that are somewhat more context-dependent — culturally, socially, and historically? I want to suggest that we cannot do justice to the variety of value and disvalue in the racial domain unless we are willing to accept a positive answer to these questions. It is possible to distinguish several distinct race-related virtues or values. These virtues will not be expressible in single terms but will be more particular — for example, "welcoming (both in attitude and behavior) members of a racial group that has been socially stigmatized." They will not, however, be mere exemplifications of more general virtues (such as respect), for they will involve particularistic moral understandings of the group in question and its history and social position. This is not to deny that these virtues may in fact be exemplifications of more general virtues. However, in being so, they will also be morally significant variants of those virtues, suggesting that these virtues come in morally significant sub-varieties that require distinct articulation.

A second possible reason for the lack of attention to race-related virtues is that "race" evokes primarily negative connotations. Thus, it may seem difficult to envision actual *virtues* connected with race, except in the minimal sense of an *absence* of certain race-related vices, such as being racist, or racially prejudiced.

A third reason is the flattened, constricted moral vocabulary so often utilized in ordinary discourse and mass media for talking about race-related rights and wrongs. There is a tendency, for example, for the term "racist" to be employed as an all-purpose term designating any and all race-related wrongs or ills. So sitting with members of one's own racial group, failing to give what another person regards as adequate recognition of her racial identity, and outright racial bigotry can all be regarded as instances of "racism"; and those examples are confined only to the interpersonal realm. A variety of racial failings of institutions and practices is also often referred to, simply, as "racism." A variety of morally distinct race-related ills can be hidden behind the single term "racist."

A fourth explanation for the lack of moral educators' attention to racial matters may stem from the notion that a single value or virtue suffices to express the right way to deal with race — the virtue customarily referred to in the United States as "color blindness," or what has also been called "race blindness." The (alleged) virtue in question consists in ignoring persons' racial identity in one's interactions with them. (Color blindness has also been put forward as a principle of social policy, where it consists in the idea that race should not be explicitly mentioned in policy prescriptions.) Color blindness might well be animating Davison Hunter's view

expressed earlier, which implies that race is not relevant to morality and so should be ignored. It can also be allied with the view that racial characteristics are only superficial and indicate nothing important about persons; hence they should not assume any role in how one deals with persons.

The deficiencies of color blindness in policy contexts have been much explored in recent literature.[8] But it is entirely inadequate as a general virtue as well. The physical characteristics associated with race are indeed superficial as human characteristics. But race as a *social* identity is a deeply significant one in many national contexts, certainly in the United States and Britain, and there are good and bad, appropriate and inappropriate, ways of dealing with racial identities. There may be a role for color blindness to play as a certain kind of social, or even interpersonal, ideal; but it cannot displace the range of values, virtues, and principles that should govern our interactions in the racialized world in which we live.

A fifth possible explanation focuses on the way that racial, ethnocultural, religious, and other such identities are often talked about in value education contexts — that educators are faced with the choice of either highlighting racial differences, or emphasizing commonalities among members of different racial groups (such as commonalities of values). The former alternative is thought to be divisive, so the latter is preferred. But this disjunction is too crude. Most young people's racial and ethnocultural, as well as other identities, are already quite salient to them. The challenge for moral education is how to acknowledge those identities in a way that promotes mutual understanding and respect and fosters interracial cooperation. Ignoring these particularistic identities will not serve this goal.

These reasons concern the conceptualization of morality, moral education, or education related to race and racial identity. As mentioned, there are no doubt additional reasons that teachers may shy away from talking about race. They may feel that the racial domain is too emotionally charged for them to handle. They may even wish they could promote constructive conversations in classrooms about race, but not feel sufficiently knowledgeable about race, or about particular racial or ethnocultural groups to do so. (Several of my high school students thought this to be true of several of their teachers.)

Two Race-Related Virtues

In the remainder of my paper, I want to suggest two race-related virtues (or perhaps clusters of virtues) that do not fit the mold of standard issue virtues. The existence of such virtues is meant to point to a wider realm of, and plurality of, race-related virtues masked by the various factors mentioned above.

I begin with a vignette from Vivian Paley's book *White Teacher*.[9] Paley (in this book) is a kindergarten teacher in a racially mixed school. The book is an account of her attempt to deepen her understanding of how she, a white teacher, can be a good teacher for a racially and ethnically mixed group of pupils. Paley describes meeting with a Black parent of one of her Black pupils. The parent, Mrs. Hawkins, relates to Paley that in her child's previous school the teacher, who was white, had said to her, "There is no color difference in my classroom. All my children look alike to me."

Mrs. Hawkins comments to Paley, "What rot! My children are Black. They do not look like your children. They know they're Black and we want it recognized. It's a positive difference, an interesting difference, and a comfortable, natural difference."[10]

Mrs. Hawkins is asking something from her child's non-Black teachers. She wants them to act and be a certain way with her children, and she is implying a more general, race-related virtue and value as well. She wants the non-Black teachers to be able to regard Black identity as both an *important* part of Black people's identity, and a *positive,* interesting, and comfortable (for themselves and others) dimension of difference. What Mrs. Hawkins wants involves certain forms of verbal behavior. In contrast to the teacher in the previous school, Mrs. Hawkins wants teachers to be able to talk about and refer to Black identity (presumably, both directly and indirectly). But clearly she wants more than this. For if a teacher seems uncomfortable doing this, he or she will not meet Mrs. Hawkins's standards. Such discomfort will suggest that the teacher fails to view Blackness, or Black identity, as something positive or comfortable.[11] Philippa Foot, in her important early virtuist essay, "Virtues and Vices" says "a virtue such as generosity lives as much in someone's attitudes as his actions."[12] This is by now a commonplace in virtue theory. If I offer money to a friend in need, this does not constitute an instance of the virtue generosity if I feel resentful and disrespectful toward the friend but have been shamed into this action by my partner.

Similarly, can we not say that Mrs. Hawkins is suggesting a virtue — I will call it "welcoming of Blackness" — that bears on race, one that involves both a form of behavior and also an attitude toward Blacks on the part of non-Blacks? Note that if we were to unpack the attitude in question, it would involve various feelings, thoughts, ways of perceiving — for example, feeling comfortable in the presence of Black people when their racial identity is being called attention to. It would not be adequate to the virtue in question if the non-Black person felt comfortable with Black people, but only when the latter avoided anything that called attention to their Black identity, for example by never mentioning it, nor mentioning or alluding to cultural markers of "Blackness" such as certain foods, music, film stars known to be Black, and so on. The virtue would characteristically require the *absence* of certain kinds of feelings and emotions, such as a feeling of self-consciousness or anxiety in referring to Blackness or Black people's Black identity.

Note that the excluded emotions in question are not simply the more distinctly racist ones of race-based contempt, fear, delight at the woe of the racial other, satisfaction at their being bested by members of one's own race, and so on. The virtue Mrs. Hawkins seeks does presuppose the absence of such emotions, but also those other emotions just mentioned, less clearly rooted in either racial antipathy or an inferiorized view of the racial other.[13]

Mrs. Hawkins is speaking not only of a comfort with Blackness on the part of non-Blacks, but a welcoming of Black racial difference in social contexts. This involves, for example, being pleased and glad that Black people are part of the enterprise one is engaged in, a belief in and felt sense that these shared activities are

enriched by the presence of Black people, and that their being Black is part of what provides that enrichment.

I call what Mrs. Hawkins proposes a virtue because it involves dispositional characteristics shared by garden variety virtues — forms of behavior, emotions, attitudes, ways of perceiving, and so on. It is a virtue both in the sense that it can be manifested by someone on occasion, without the person's possessing a trait version of it; but it can also come in a trait version. That is, a non-Black person could have a standing and deeply rooted way of viewing Blackness and Black identity as natural and positive, and a disposition to exhibit this attitude in appropriate circumstances. Or she could do this on one occasion without possessing the underlying disposition or state.

Welcoming of Blackness shares two other features with virtues traditionally understood. First, it refers not simply to the performance of particular discrete acts, nor a bare disposition to do so, but to forms of behavior that are inseparable from an underlying sensibility, characteristic emotions, and moral understandings.[14] Second, possession of the characteristic in question is only partly within the direct scope of the will. One cannot just *choose* to welcome Blackness. To do so requires engagement with one's characteristic ways of thinking about, regarding, and responding to Black people.

What are the elements of the virtue of welcoming of Blackness? Mrs. Hawkins speaks of "recognition." This evokes Charles Taylor's famous argument that the modern era has surfaced recognition as a new value, or rather a value whose realization previous eras could take for granted but in the modern era has to be consciously adopted and conferred.[15] Mrs. Hawkins is in the spirit of Taylor's argument when she says she wants Black identity recognized, since it is such socially important group identities with which Taylor is primarily concerned.

As Taylor's view implies, the virtue in question goes beyond recognition in the sense of an acknowledgment of a distinct identity. It involves a *positive valuing* of the identity in question.[16] This positive valuing is, in part, a recognition of the value of the identity *to Black people*. But it goes beyond this to involve the non-Black agent herself regarding Blackness as a positive value for her — as something to be welcomed in her own social existence.[17]

One element of welcoming of Blackness may seem troubling, calling into question whether it should be seen as a positive value at all, or at least mitigating that value. Why should "Blackness" as such be valued? For one thing, many contemporary race theorists and scientists have argued that there are no races in the sense in which "race" is commonly understood; if so, there seems no Blackness to be valued. However, though there may be no races, the groups we designate by racial terms are genuine historical groups — groups with a shared history and social existence arising from their having been viewed as and treated as if they were genuine races. They are, in that sense, "racialized groups."[18] Especially in the case of Blacks in the United States, becoming a racialized group has meant adopting a self-identity as a distinct group, developing cultural forms and ways of life that express that identity

and express the historical experience of being an inferiorized and generally stigmatized group. This response to inferiorization has also involved multiple and complex forms of resistance to that inferiorization. In that sense, Blacks have developed a positive self-identity out the negative experience of racialization and racial discrimination. It is this positive identity that is an appropriate focus for the positive valuing, and welcoming, that Mrs. Hawkins suggests. And this positive identity provides an answer both to the objection that races do not exist, so there is no "Blackness" to value; and also to the objection that if Blackness is an historically constructed identity, it is so by virtue of being created as a stigmatized and inferiorized identity, and so not an appropriate object of positive value.

A different worry about this alleged virtue is that it would seem to require stereotyping of groups. What could the "Blackness" be that is welcomed unless it is a set of stereotypes and stereotypical expectations of Black people? I would say that such a stereotypical form of this welcoming is a corrupted form of the virtue in question, not an inevitable, necessary one. A non-Black can expect that her activities that are shared with Blacks will be enriched by their presence, and will be so in a way that is related to the historical experience and cultural forms of Blacks, without necessarily expecting specific opinions or types of behavior from the particular Black people engaged in the shared activities. Blackness need not be stereotyped or "essentialized" to constitute a distinct and coherent identity, even if it is an identity that has in fact been prey to powerful stereotyping. Surely most Black people possess their Black identity in a non-stereotypic manner, as members of any ethnoracial group do. When a non-Black is interacting with a Black person in a way that expresses the appropriate sense of appreciation and welcoming, she must allow the Black person to have her own individual way of understanding her Black identity; the non-Black should not impose, or expect, the individual Black person to have a particular understanding of that identity. So, although welcoming of Blackness necessarily has a group-focused dimension, it can be applied to individuals in a way that allows for individuality, for individual forms of appropriation and understanding of that group identity.[19]

As I am construing welcoming of Blackness, in the spirit of Mrs. Hawkins's remark, it necessarily involves a person focus. It is Black *persons* who are welcomed, though not every mode of welcoming of Black persons will instantiate the virtue; welcoming them only insofar as they downplay their Black identity will not count. Merely enjoying and seeking out cultural products of Blacks will not count; it will not count as welcoming of Blackness if someone loves movies with Denzel Washington, Angela Bassett, and Omar Epps, but does not wish to be in the presence of Black people.

So "welcoming of Blackness" is an example of a virtue, or a complex of virtues, that is race-related, cannot be simply reduced to a standard issue virtue, and is of a sort that is pertinent to moral education. I want to suggest one other such virtue, suggested by an exchange among several of the students in my high school "Race and Racism" class. The exchange concerned a territory that is very evaluatively, and in a sense morally, charged for high school students — the adoption by non-blacks,

and especially whites, of black youth cultural styles (music, clothes, modes of personal appearance, modes of address, and so on). In the conversation in question, Gurty, a judicious, race-conscious black girl, not generally given to outrage or provocation, suggested that blacks often feel that when whites "act black," blacks feel that something is being taken from them. In responding to my reply that cultural influence can be seen as a sign of blacks' power and cultural influence, another black girl, Tatiana, said that when she sees whites talking or acting in a "black" manner, they seem to her to be mocking blacks, rather than respecting them or appreciating their culture. Gurty's and Tatiana's views are distinct. Gurty's does not depend on the attitude with which Whites adopt black culture styles. Her view seemed to me to arise from a sense of black vulnerability and deprivation. I think she was saying that blacks are not doing well, and do not have much to show for themselves; so when something that they treasure, such as their culture, is appropriated by the dominant group, this seems like theft — whatever the motive. Tatiana, by contrast, was citing the motive or attitude (mocking) as the source of the moral fault.

I would like to try to extract from this exchange a kind of virtue related to race and culture, distinct from welcoming of blackness, and also distinct from other virtues so far discussed. Here is an approximation: When a member of group A wishes to partake of the cultural expression of group B where group B is a racial group that has borne a history of stigmatization, show due respect to group B as the originator of the cultural modes in question. This is not a pure human respect, owed to others as persons, or human beings. It is a form incurred specifically by partaking of group B's culture. But it also does not depend on an essentialized or racialized view of culture; it does not see anything wrong in general with appropriating the culture of another group. It is even consistent with seeing a general value to a society of having people of one group develop the cultural forms associated with a different, primary group, even if this value violates the virtue in question. (This is related to the value's being a virtue rather than a strict moral requirement.)

Both these virtues — welcoming of blackness, and (a form of) cultural respect related to race — are meant to be suggestive. Details would need to be worked out. The general point is that the terrain of value in relation to race is multifarious, and includes virtues as well as vices. Moral education that relates to the society of which it is a part should find ways to theorize and put into practice a more explicit and forthright engagement with racial issues.[20]

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1. Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991).

2. James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age Without Good or Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 171.

3. Larry Nucci, *Education in the Moral Domain* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

4. Kevin Ryan and Karen Bohlin, *Building Character in Schools* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999).

5. Ibid., 3.

6. Philippa Foot says, "For us there are four cardinal moral virtues: courage, temperance, wisdom, and justice. See Phillipa Foot, "Virtues and Vices," in *Virtue Ethic,* ed. Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 164.

7. Linda T. Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: In Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 89.

8. Glenn Loury, *Anatomy of Racial Inequality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002) and Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres, *The Miner's Canary* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2002).

9. Vivian Paley, *White Teacher* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 12.

10. Ibid.

11. One caveat here: Some teachers might have adopted such a strong belief in "colorblindness," or, more accurately, "colormuteness"(not referring to racial identity) that this by itself is enough to produce discomfort in referring to Black identity, independent of any specific feelings the teacher has about Blacks. On "colormuteness," see Mica Pollock, *Colormuteness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

12. Foot, "Virtues and Vices," 166.

13. Elsewhere I argue that the sort of racial discomfort referred to in the previous paragraph may be, but often is not, rooted in racist views of the other. See Lawrence Blum, *"I'm Not a Racist, But…"*: *The Moral Quandary of Race* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002), 66-69.

14. See Crisp and Slote in their introduction to *Virtue Ethics*: "Another striking feature of virtue ethics is its focus on moral agents and their lives, rather than on discrete actions (telling a lie, having an abortion, giving to a beggar) construed in isolation from the notion of character"; Crisp and Slote, *Virtue Ethics*, 3.

15. Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

16. Susan Wolf, in her comment on Taylor's essay, similarly distinguishes the "recognition of the existence" and "seeing the value" dimensions of what Taylor calls "recognition." See Susan Wolf, "Comment," in Taylor, *Multiculturalism*, 75.

17. Of course, the way that a racial identity is of value to its members is different from the way that it provides value to nonmembers.

18. Blum, *"I'm Not a Racist, But…,"* chap. 8.

19. Although persons can put an individual stamp on the meaning of their racial identity, there are obviously limits to these meanings. There is no getting around the way that racial identity is an entirely involuntary identity, yet one fraught with great social significance.

20. I wish to acknowledge that, in light of the comments from Dwight Boyd, Kal Alston, and others, I now regard the choice of terminology of "welcoming of Blackness" to be unfortunate and misleading. I think that could be construed as a form of patronizing, and does not sufficiently convey the sense of peerhood and equality that I was searching for in the virtue in question. I now prefer something like "peer recognition" plus a kind of non-patronizing valuing of Black people. My amended views on this matter appear, in the context of a fuller discussion both of the virtue in question, and of the context of virtue theory in general, in Lawrence Blum, "Racial Virtues," in *Working Virtue,* ed. P.J. Ivanhoe and Rachel Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).