

The Conceptual and Practical Role of Intellectual Virtues in Moral Education

Rebecca M. Taylor

Emory University

In his article, “The Intellectual Goals of Character Education,” Ben Kotzee takes up the important question of the proper aims of character education.¹ He argues that schools should aim to inculcate intellectual virtues rather than moral virtues, as has been the traditional focus of character education models. In arguing for this claim, Kotzee presents an impressively clear line of reasoning:

1. Moral virtues and intellectual virtues are distinct; (and thus) the question of whether schools should seek to promote one, the other, or both is a valid question.
2. Logically speaking, “the ultimate aim of proper moral education” is the intellectual development of students.
3. Practically speaking, schools are best suited to promote intellectual virtues and not best suited to promote moral virtues.

Kotzee defends each of these three claims in support of his conclusion that schools should aim to promote intellectual virtues *and not* moral virtues.

I strongly agree with Kotzee about the importance of inculcating intellectual virtues in schools; however, I am wary of his conclusion that schools should concern themselves with the intellectual virtues *to the exclusion of* the moral virtues, which he argues are more appropriately left to families, churches, and communities to develop in children. I will pose some questions relating to each step in Kotzee’s argument.

One of the primary tasks of schools is certainly to foster students’ intellectual development. Kotzee offers two types of argument (one Kantian and one Aristotelian) to support his conclusion that logic dictates that the ultimate goal of character education in schools should be to teach intellectual virtue and not moral virtue. Throughout both of these sections, Kotzee at times jumps too quickly from arguing that intellectual development is a necessary and vital aim of education, to the conclusion that schools should not aim to promote moral development more broadly. My first point with regard to this part of the article, then, is a structural one. Although this section contains several statements of the conclusion that schools should teach intellectual virtue and not moral virtue, both versions of the argument presented establish only that the proper aims of schools include inculcating intellectual virtues, not that they, therefore, exclude moral virtues.

Let’s consider one version of the argument. In diverse democratic societies, schools are also tasked with preparing students for democratic citizenship. Kotzee acknowledges the role of schools in preparing students for citizenship. Here, he argues that “moral life [in democratic society] requires independent thinking ability.”² Engaging in public discourse, he rightly argues, requires intellectual virtues such as

accuracy, open-mindedness, and reasonableness. From this reasonable observation, Kotzee draws a conclusion that demands further warrant. He moves from observing that democratic citizenship requires intellectual virtue (i.e., that teaching intellectual virtue is necessary), to the conclusion that schools should focus on the development of intellectual virtues of thought and communication *rather than* moral virtues of action (i.e., that teaching intellectual virtue is sufficient). But this conclusion demands further justification. The call for moral education to focus exclusively on the development of intellectual virtues needs to establish why, logically speaking, schooling should not be concerned with moral development.

Aside from this point about the logical argument for Kotzee's conclusion, I also want to raise some questions about whether it is feasible to aim to teach intellectual virtues but not moral virtues. My question here stems from considering the extent to which moral and intellectual virtues are distinct. I do not want to challenge that it is possible to draw logical distinctions between the two types of virtues, but I do question whether their successful exercise is separable to an extent that makes aiming to teach only one set or the other a feasible aim. Let's say that intellectual virtues aim primarily at intellectual goods such as knowledge and understanding, and moral virtues aim primarily at wellbeing. Is it not still possible that virtues depend on each other across these boundaries for their successful exercise in a variety of real-world contexts? Exercising the virtue of mutual respect may at times require the intellectual virtue of open-mindedness; exercising open-mindedness may require courage in some contexts. If certain intellectual and moral virtues depend on each other for their successful exercise, we must consider whether this raises problems for character education that would focus exclusively on intellectual virtues.

Finally, I want to question the argument that it is more productive to rely on schools for intellectual training and to leave moral education to institutions other than the school, such as the family. Kotzee addresses the challenge that moral virtues should be included along with intellectual virtues in schooling by considering the practicality of schools fostering each. Here, he presents a pragmatic argument that schools are best suited to teach intellectual virtues and not moral virtues.

I don't deny that families and communities are well-positioned to take on the task of moral education. However, when considering, in particular, the need to prepare young people for citizenship in a diverse democratic society and to inculcate political virtues such as mutual respect and autonomy, the role of the school becomes more apparent. In preparing students for citizenship, we want students to acquire not only the intellectual virtues and skills required for thoughtful deliberation, but also the political virtues that are not solely intellectual in nature and that they may not acquire at home. We want students to learn to engage respectfully and productively with difference, and common schools are uniquely situated to perform this function.

Moreover, while it is true that schools are fundamentally engaged in the intellectual development of students, much of schooling is also undeniably about socialization. It is at school that students first learn about their roles in the broader society. Unfortunately, when not purposefully and thoughtfully incorporated into the formal curriculum, the social training that students receive tends to reinforce existing

norms and inequalities and to perpetuate the current system rather than preparing students to improve it. We need schools to support students to learn to advocate for themselves and others, to seek understanding across social boundaries, to work towards a more just society. We need to prepare students for critical citizenship in the real world. Working to instill the political virtues that go beyond the purely intellectual is important to this task.

I agree that intellectual virtues are vital to education and that they play an important role in moral development as well. However, schools also have a responsibility to prepare students for democratic citizenship, and it is in fulfilling this duty that schools must move beyond solely the intellectual virtues in their efforts to foster students' moral development.

-
1. Ben Kotzee, this volume.
 2. Ibid.