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Do Virtue Ethicists Parent Poorly? The Threat of Developmental Psychology for Moral Education and Responsibility in Virtue Ethics

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**Do Virtue Ethicists Parent Poorly?
The Threat of Developmental Psychology
for Moral Education and Responsibility in Virtue Ethics**

J. B. Delston¹

Abstract

In this paper, I argue that virtue ethics is unfortunately committed to a developmentally detrimental form of moral evaluation in its traditional iterations. That is, first, because both action guidance and moral development are central to virtue ethics and, second, because virtue ethics permits or requires character appraisal in moral education and child-rearing through praise and blame. However, studies from developmental and clinical psychology show that praise or blame involving character appraisal can be detrimental to children and, especially, to women and girls. While not all empirical studies point in this direction, the data are sufficiently murky to warrant an objection to virtue ethics along the lines of a situationism. Using a feminist and care-oriented critique, I argue this could pose a problem for virtue ethics. However, I argue that the criterion of moral evaluation can and must be distinguished from successful moral education of children to avoid this problem. By focusing on behavior instead of character, moral agents can avoid the harm virtue ethics may cause. Finally, I respond to an objection that doing so makes virtue ethics esoteric or self-effacing and argue that it fares no worse than other moral theories.

Keywords: moral development, situationism, child-rearing, moral psychology, sexism, Aristotle, action guidance, criterion of morality

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Introduction

Some empirical studies undermine the efficacy of the type of moral advice virtue ethicists provide for child-rearing. For example, developmental psychology uncovers problems with telling children to “be kind,” “be generous,” or “be nice.” Similarly, psychologists recommend against praising children as such when they exhibit virtuous behavior. For example, they recommend against calling a child “a great kid,” or “smart,” or “an angel.” While virtue ethics survives these attacks as a successful moral theory, I offer a feminist critique, arguing in this paper that it must drastically revise the type of action guidance, child-rearing advice, and praise and blame it offers. In fact, I argue that being virtuous and rearing virtuous children calls for the explicit removal of much virtue language and thought.

In this paper, I argue that virtue ethics is—but need not be—committed to a developmentally detrimental form of moral evaluation. First, I motivate the problem by arguing that both action guidance and moral development are central to virtue ethics. Next, I argue that virtue ethics permits or requires character appraisal in moral education and child-rearing through praise and blame. Third, I look at studies from developmental and clinical psychology giving evidence that praise or blame that involves character appraisal can be detrimental to children, taking a situationist critique of the issue (Doris 2022, 2005). I then challenge this evidence, considering that not all empirical studies point in this direction, but argue the data are sufficiently murky to warrant an objection. I next argue that virtue ethics can circumvent this problem by paying careful attention to it. I argue that the criterion of moral evaluation—that an action knowingly comes about from a firm and unchanging virtuous state—must be distinguished from successful moral education—that we must ignore virtuous states to achieve them. In other words, moral responsibility must be distinguished from attributions of moral responsibility. By focusing on behavior instead of character, we can avoid the harm virtue ethics may cause. Finally, I respond to an objection that focusing on behavior in virtue language makes virtue ethics esoteric or self-effacing.

This approach exemplifies a feminist approach to the problem for two main reasons. First, it tackles a subject matter often undervalued in nonfeminist spaces: children and child-rearing. An approach that more explicitly centers and values the role of care can advance the debate in a feminist way (McKittrick-Sweitzer 2021a, 2021b). Care itself is a gendered area of the human experience. Women are often in caregiving positions in their families and jobs. Examining care is often seen as making central an overlooked area of ethics, and valuing care is seen as valuing a traditionally feminine or gendered approach. Although I am looking at care through the lens of the concepts in moral responsibility of praise and blame, I focus on the role of these concepts in caring relationships with the goal of rearing flourishing individuals.

Second, failure to attend to the concerns raised in this discussion harms girls and feminine children due to sexism. That is, since girls are more likely to receive whole-person praise or blame, and since this type of praise and blame is more likely to harm, there are sexist ramifications of the argument I address. Equity, then, requires the feminist analysis I undertake here.

1. Virtue Ethics Has an Empirical Commitment to Provide Action Guidance and Direction on Child-Rearing

Virtue ethicists have largely kept the practical and applied aspects of their theories at the forefront of moral theorizing. That virtue ethics places a high worth on action guidance is evidenced, for example, from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.² For Aristotle, ethics must offer practical guidance to be worthwhile; it must tell us how to become good and not just describe goodness. Thus, Aristotle is not satisfied with defining "the criterion of morality;" he also requires the provision of a decision-making procedure.³

Objections sometimes characterize virtue ethics as agent-centered instead of act-centered. Although this description of virtue ethics as "agent-centered" might be an oversimplification of the view, its recommendations often take the form of telling us how to *be* rather than how to *act*. The standard recommendations virtue ethicists make with regard to directing behavior are character-based, such as "be kind" or "be brave." According to Rosalind Hursthouse, virtue ethics provides action guidance, in that it recommends we do what a virtuous agent would do. This prescription means seeking advice from a virtuous person. It also provides more general guidance: each virtue and each vice yields a rule. Hursthouse (1999, 36) says, "Not only does each virtue generate a prescription—do what is honest, charitable, generous—but each vice a prohibition—do not do what is dishonest, uncharitable, mean." In other words, we can easily revise supposed agent-centered guidance to achieve act-centered advice.

Plato and Aristotle recognize that the easiest way to achieve virtue is to develop it from an early age, so they devote sections of their work to moral upbringing.⁴ When speaking of upbringing, Aristotle says not just that it is significant, but that it is "very important, indeed all-important" (EN 1103b23–25 [Aristotle 1999,

² For example, EN 1103b27–31.

³ On the distinction between the criterion of morality and the decision-making procedure, see Sidgwick (1884), Bales (1971), and Driver (2005). I discuss this distinction in more detail below.

⁴ For example, see especially *Republic* 376c–379, 424a.

19]).⁵ Because achieving virtue takes consistency, habit, reflection, and personal growth, this focus on child-rearing recognizes the role that time plays in becoming good. In fact, the unity of the virtues also implies that practical wisdom about one virtue means practical wisdom about child-rearing.⁶

Not only do virtue ethicists provide guidance on achieving virtue, but they also provide guidance on how to teach it using societal institutions. Aristotle says, “For the legislator makes the citizens good by habituating them, and this is the wish of every legislator; if he fails to do it well he misses his goal” (EN 1103b2–6 [Aristotle 1999, 19]). In the *Politics*, Aristotle addresses this subject in greater detail. As Susan Moller Okin (1998, 221) points out, Aristotle spends more time discussing child-rearing than every other subject combined.⁷ For example, Aristotle thinks that, “No one would dispute that it is the lawgiver most of all who should attend to the education of the young” (*Politics* 1337a10–11 [Aristotle 1986, 222]).⁸ Educating the youth is of the utmost importance for creating a good people and a good state.

Contemporary virtue ethicists have taken up the charge, almost universally placing importance on child-rearing. For example, take Soran Reader’s (2000, 360) claim: “All virtue ethicists agree, then, that the constitution of a virtuous agent requires the inculcation of virtue through education in childhood.” Christine Swanton takes it as given when she says, “The ‘warp and woof’ of life in its various facets—the expression of culture or heritage, central activities such as bringing up children, work, or leisure—are part of the stuff of morality” (Swanton 2005, 69). Raja Halwani (2003, 172) takes upbringing as central to the development of virtue: “A virtuous agent is *reliable*: because of her moral education, training, and upbringing, she can be relied upon to do what is virtuous.” Furthermore, virtue ethicists seek out empirical evidence on what guidance on child-rearing is likely to be beneficial to children.

This approach of virtue ethics includes relational values that are concerned with care and that are often made central in feminist ethics, making the issue of care a historically feminist concern (Noddings 2003, esp. chap. 4). And the connection

⁵ Examples of recommendations on child-rearing abound in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (e.g., 1095b3–8, 1094b29–1095a7, 1105a2–3). In 1119b, he considers this subject further.

⁶ For example, Badhwar (1996, 312) makes this claim about the unity of the virtues in Aristotle. See also Swanton (2005, 26).

⁷ Sections of the *Politics* where Aristotle discusses child-rearing include 1259a37–1259b16, 1260a30–1260b23, 1334b1–end.

⁸ Other representative quotations in the *Politics* include 1336b33–5, 1334b7–10, 1334b24–27, 1334b29–31, 1334b38–39, and 1335a4–5. These examples only offer a small subset of the discussion.

between virtue ethics and care ethics is also valued in particular, with Halwani (2003) arguing that care can be included under the umbrella of virtue ethics.

In this section, I motivated the problem by demonstrating that virtue ethicists are committed to offer action guidance and advice on child-rearing for attaining virtue. But what type of guidance and advice? In the next section, I argue that virtue ethics is committed to character appraisal for child-rearing through praise and blame.

2. Virtue Ethics Permits or Requires Character Appraisal for Moral Education and Child-Rearing

Virtue ethics fosters the evaluation of children’s whole persons, their characters, and their stable traits in moral development as a rule. To defend this claim, I first give an account of cases in which virtue ethicists explicitly recommend teaching children moral concepts through character appraisal. Second, I argue that virtue ethics is implicitly committed to character appraisal, even when it does not explicitly recommend it. Third, I argue that even when virtue ethics is not explicitly or implicitly committed to character appraisal, it overlooks the possibility of the threat from developmental psychology, thus permitting character appraisal or, at least, opening the door to it.

2.A. Virtue Ethics Explicitly Requires Character Appraisal for Child-Rearing

Those concerned with child-rearing rely heavily on virtue language, as seen in well-regarded children’s books (e.g., Lobel 1999, 42–43; Silberman 1997; Steptoe 2008). Virtue language is useful in part because it is easily understood by and expressible to children, while the language of competing ethical theories is often complex or abstract and might be too sophisticated for children. As a result, virtue language is often used when teaching children morality, and parents often want their children to be virtuous.⁹

Virtue ethicists themselves routinely recommend using virtue language with children. For example, Hursthouse recommends we use character-appraisal virtue language with children. Hursthouse takes action-guidance and child-rearing to be of a piece and argues that virtue language can be easily adapted to address children. She states,

But an ethics inspired by Aristotle is unlikely to have forgotten the question of moral education, and the objection fails to hit home. . . . Sentences such as “Don’t do that, it hurts the cat, you mustn’t be cruel,” “Be kind to your brother, he’s only little,” “Don’t be so mean,

⁹ For example, Stohr and Wellman (2002, 58) interpret Hursthouse as making this claim.

so greedy,” are commonly addressed to toddlers. (Hursthouse 1999, 38)

Here, Hursthouse notably circumvents the v-rules she so carefully defends when she adapts them for use with children. Rather than tell children to “do what is kind,” she thinks we should or do tell them things like “be kind.” This subtle difference marks a grammatical shift from behavior to character in praise and blame.

T. H. Irwin explicitly denies that virtue ethicists can avoid character appraisal, since he argues that behavioral evaluation is insufficient to describe virtue. For example, he states, “The Socratic dialogues suggest that it is difficult to give an account of virtuous action in purely behavioural terms” (Irwin 1998, 45). In other words, discussing behavior alone is not an alternative to evaluating character because it inadequately describes virtue and virtue ethics recommendations. According to Irwin, it is deficient to tell children to “never retreat” to successfully impart bravery, since this behavioral account of what seems to be brave action will not always be necessary or sufficient for the virtue of bravery. Instead, we must focus on character to achieve a more consistent and complete guide to a moral life.

Examples abound of virtue ethicists explicitly committing themselves to character appraisal for child-rearing. In fact, large campaigns are directed at incorporating more virtue language in educating children (“The Character Project,” n.d.). For my purposes, it is enough to point out that these commitments are uncontroversial and span ancient and contemporary discussions.

2.B. Virtue Ethics Implicitly Requires Character Appraisal for Child-Rearing

Four main reasons show that virtue ethicists are committed to character appraisal in praise and blame implicitly, even if one disagrees with me that they explicitly recommend it. First, according to Aristotle, the criteria for an action to be virtuous are threefold: agents must perform the action knowingly; agents must perform the action for its own sake and not for some other reason like self-interest; and agents must perform the action from a firm and unchanging state. This last criterion for a virtuous action notably requires character appraisal. If you want to know whether someone else’s action is virtuous or if you want to evaluate your own actions, you must consider the stable character traits from which that action arises.¹⁰ It is on the basis of character that we evaluate actors’ moral responsibility.

Second, virtue ethics requires we model our behavior on moral exemplars. However, using moral exemplars to guide or direct action requires evaluation of character. For example, a famous aphorism asks, “What would Jesus do?” I should follow suit only if Jesus was a good person. Should I “be like Mike,” as the

¹⁰ In the *Republic* (409d5–10), we see Plato making similar claims about judges.

advertisement commands? It depends on my evaluation of Michael Jordan. We require character appraisal when we find and imitate our virtuous exemplars. Such character appraisal is often directed at children. Parents encourage children to find and imitate morally good people. They get upset when the role models they have set up for their children turn out to be morally failing in some way. The notorious dictum, “Why can’t you be more like your sibling?” exemplifies this procedure in a more pernicious fashion.

Third, virtue ethics recommends the use of habituation to achieve virtue. However, habituation requires the direction of one’s acts toward stable character traits, which in turn requires evaluation of character. For example, to attain bravery, I should face my fears on a regular basis, which inures me to my fears and habituates me to act with confidence. Thus, if I wonder why I am facing my fears today, I tell myself it is so that I can become brave. Likewise, without telling children that they will benefit later, they will not understand why they are undergoing discomfort now.

Fourth, self-knowledge is required for attainment of virtue. However, self-knowledge requires agents to evaluate their characters. For example, suppose I know I am a coward. This knowledge helps me attain the virtue of bravery by telling me what to work on, how much I need to work on it, and how to work on it: I should overshoot the mean by acting in a way that otherwise seems to me to be rash. The ability to overshoot the mean and aim at an excess or deficiency to successfully attain virtue crucially depends on knowing my stable character traits and employing self-reflection to discover them. In the case of moral development, this advice is passed from parent to child. According to virtue ethics, parents ought to encourage character appraisal in their children to help them not only to “live the examined life” but also to be self-reliant with regard to the direction of their actions.

Similarly, knowledge of human nature is required for attainment of virtue. However, knowledge of human nature requires agents to evaluate many people over time to discover patterns and common character traits. Just as Aristotle recommends self-knowledge to direct action, he also recommends knowledge of human nature. For example, he notes that human beings are more likely to stray to the excess of intemperance than the deficiency of insensibility (EN 1119a6–11). With this knowledge, we can better protect ourselves from vice.

In this section, I offered four reasons to think virtue ethics is implicitly committed to character appraisal, even if it does not explicitly recommend it: the evaluation of acts, role models, habituation, and self-knowledge all are required to attain virtue and all require character appraisal. Moral education and moral

responsibility for the virtue ethicist, then, cannot help but require character appraisal.¹¹

2.C. Virtue Ethics Permits Character Appraisal for Child-Rearing by Overlooking Its Role in Child-Rearing

In the last two sections, I showed virtue ethics requires character appraisal. However, virtue ethics also permits character appraisal. This fact obtains primarily because those virtue ethicists who seemingly avoid the threat still fail to warn against it. In other words, when virtue ethicists overlook the issue of character appraisal, they tacitly permit it. Thus, these sections work independently.

The virtue ethics literature largely overlooks the relevant psychological work done in this area. First, some ignore child-rearing. For example, in his entire corpus, Alasdair MacIntyre mentions children only a couple of times, and when he does (MacIntyre 2007), it is not always to discuss child-rearing. Other virtue ethicists discuss the importance of child-rearing but do not give guidance on how to foster virtuous children. These theorists recognize the importance of moral education but, since they do not supply advice in one direction or another, cannot help but overlook developmental psychology on character appraisal.

Still other virtue ethicists discuss the importance of child-rearing, give guidance on moral education, and use psychological studies, but they are nevertheless committed to character appraisal. For example, Okin takes care to include research from psychology with respect to moral education. However, she is still implicitly committed to character appraisal. According to Okin, "Moral character is to be acquired through the formation of good habits, for which the example of one to whom the child is deeply attached is crucial" (Okin 1998, 222). Here, she recommends using moral exemplars and habituation to achieve moral development in children, both of which involve character appraisal, as shown above.

Lastly, some virtue ethicists construct a complex and nuanced Aristotelian approach to child-rearing that successfully avoids any recommendation that implicates character appraisal toward children. But these works still fail on my account. First, they do not cite the relevant psychological studies, meaning they cannot take advantage of the most effectual and proven means of moral education. Furthermore, since they do not discuss character appraisal, they fail to warn of the danger. For example, Nancy Sherman's discussion of child-rearing neatly avoids any recommendation that would approximate character appraisal. However, without a more specific set of references, it is unclear whether she accidentally hit upon these

¹¹ On this point, Vasiliou (1996, 775) discusses a debate between Burnyeat and Irwin about whether someone with poor upbringing can be persuaded by rational arguments.

methods, or whether she purposefully does, and it is unclear how she can successfully impart the relevant advice without a thorough explanation of why she excises character appraisal from teaching virtue (Sherman 1991).

I argue that virtue ethicists wrongly overlook the danger of virtue language in moral evaluations, action guidance, and child-rearing. Even more negligently, virtue ethicists consistently recommend advice on moral education without taking into account empirical research on these matters. Without taking advantage of the range of relevant insights from psychology, virtue ethicists run the risk of recommending methods, teachings, and advice that are proven to be wrong.

3. The Danger of Character Appraisal in Moral Education and Moral Responsibility

In this section, I review a long-standing empirical literature showing that character appraisal, often in combination with virtue language, can be damaging to children.¹² The research on this topic shows, first, that the effect is robust and, second, that we would be wrong to ignore it. Since an intersectional approach to moral responsibility can and should aim to highlight and oppose harms like this one (Cicurria 2020, 3–5), focus on this type of harm, especially of a vulnerable group, can be helpful on the path to eliminating it. Insofar as it follows the situationist critique of virtue ethics from authors like John Doris (2022, 2005), this argument challenges the role that robust characteristics can play in moral agency and demonstrates how the manner of speaking to children can have a large impact on self-conception, responsibility, and agency.

Small differences between evaluating character and evaluating behavior can have large influences on children. First, researchers distinguish between process, product, and person feedback. For example, they make the following distinction between types of sentences: “Maybe you could think of another way to row the boat” (process) versus “That’s not the right way to row the boat” (product) versus “You are bad at boat rowing” (person). Second, researchers distinguish between generic and nongeneric sentences. For example, they distinguish between “Ahab is a friendly guy” (generic) versus “Ahab was friendly at the gam” (nongeneric). Third, they distinguish

¹² This effect has also been consistently reported in the media and academic sources. See ABC News (2007), Baumeister, Hutton, and Cairns (1990), Bell et al. (1994), Bronson (2007), Butler (1987), Cimpian, Mu, and Erickson (2012), Damon (1990), Deci (1996), Dweck (1999, 2000, 2002, 2007), Ferlazzo (2012), Gladwell (2002), Guttenplan (2011), Herbert (2012), Levy and Dweck (1998), Mueller and Dweck (1998), *New York Times* (1998), Pintrich and Blumenfeld (1985), Plaks et al. (2001), and Wall et al. (1999).

between fixed mindset and growth mindset.¹³ For example, “Ahab is extremely talented, so he succeeded at navigating those waters” (fixed) versus “Ahab worked for many years on navigating waters and now excels at it.” I use the term “character appraisal” as an umbrella term for all such feedback directed at a whole person rather than at effort, outcome, behavior, or specific actions.

According to developmental psychologists, character appraisal encourages helpless behavior, quitting, poor self-worth, contingent self-worth, poor coping mechanisms, vicious behavior, misbehavior, guilt, and self-blame; and it exacerbates gender differences to the detriment of girls (Malespina, Schunn, and Singh 2022; Law et al. 2021; Brummelman and Dweck 2020).¹⁴

First, psychologists have documented the effects between praising and criticizing children for their process versus their person (Lessard, Grossman, and Syme 2015). Melissa Kamins and Carol Dweck describe this phenomenon in a 1999 paper:

Results indicated that children displayed significantly more “helpless” responses (including self-blame) on all dependent measures after person criticism or praise than after process criticism or praise. Thus person feedback, even when positive, can create vulnerability and a sense of contingent self-worth. (Kamins and Dweck 1999, 835)

Perhaps after person praise, children feel that any further attempts at the task would only diminish their position in the eyes of the person giving feedback. Or perhaps it teaches them to externalize their self-worth. It also sends the message that one is a good person when one displays skill at an activity, suggesting that worth is contingent on irrelevant successes. The authors continue: “Praising the whole person (e.g., “You are a good boy/girl”) after success on a task fostered helpless responses to subsequent mistakes more than praising the process through which success was achieved (e.g., “You found a good way to do it”)” (Cimpian et al. 2007, 314). When discussing the difference between process and person feedback, authors identify the following pitfalls in children: vulnerability, contingent self-worth, helplessness, poor coping mechanisms, and self-blame.

Second, some psychologists suggest that process praise is more effective than person praise because it is nongeneric where person praise is generic. Studies of

¹³ Other terminology is also used. For example, Ginott (2003) uses the terms “evaluative praise” and “evaluative feedback” to describe this phenomenon.

¹⁴ Although the long-term effects of character appraisal are more controversial than the general phenomenon in lab settings, researchers can replicate the results in a variety of different circumstances and with a variety of different children. Even if the detrimental effects are short-lived, they are relevant for my philosophical purposes.

generic and nongeneric evaluation identify problems that emerge only when criticism is followed by generic feedback. For example,

When criticized, children who had been told they were “good drawers” were more likely than those who had been told they “did a good job drawing” to denigrate their skill, feel sad, avoid the unsuccessful drawings and even drawing in general, and fail to generate strategies to repair their mistake. (Cimpian et al. 2007, 314)

The detrimental effects of generic praise documented include helpless behavior, low motivation, reduced persistence, extreme emotional response, low self-worth, and reduced coping mechanisms. According to one study, children had intense bouts of crying when they received criticism after generic praise, whereas children criticized after nongeneric praise seemed unfazed.¹⁵

Third, developmental psychologists distinguish between fixed and growth mindsets. Fixed mindsets suggest a view of the self closely akin to that of virtue ethics: it demonstrates a sense of self based on stable, global, character traits that are central to the conceit of virtue as a state. However, developmental psychologists report that a fixed mindset is more detrimental to success at difficult tasks than is a growth mindset. In experiments, although children with fixed versus growth mindsets do not differ with respect to intelligence or skill, they differ greatly when encountering challenges. Those who think talent, intelligence, character traits, and skill are fixed fall into helpless-oriented patterns, while those who have growth mindsets fall into mastery-oriented patterns (Dweck 1999, 5–10). When encountering difficult problems, fifth graders who showed fixed mindsets diminished their abilities and blamed their intelligence for failures, reporting that they would no longer be able to complete tasks they had just performed well, exaggerated their failures (eight successful problems and four incomplete problems were remembered as five successes and six failures), expressed boredom, tried to change the parameters of the task, gave up, or showed a marked diminishment in strategies used. Coping mechanisms involved non sequiturs. Dweck (1999, 8) says, “For example, one child, in the middle of the failure problems, stopped to inform us that she was soon to be an heiress, and another reported that she had been cast as Shirley Temple in the school play.” These coping mechanisms to preserve both self-worth and perceived worth were detrimental to the completing the task at hand. In the other group, students did not see the inability to complete problems as a failure at all. Students in

¹⁵ This phenomenon is shown in group stereotyping as well as in individuals. Although generic statements about groups support my thesis, they do not pertain as closely as those statements about individuals.

this group did not show a difference in optimism, confidence, or projections of success. They showed excellent strategies for problem-solving and even completed some problems designed to be too difficult for them.

Perhaps most importantly for the purposes of child-rearing, fixed and growth mindsets can be fostered in the classroom (Dweck 1999, 8–10; Elliott and Dweck 1988; Ames and Archer 1988; Graham and Golan 1991; Pintrich and Garcia 1991). In other words, we cannot take a fixed mindset about fixed mindsets. Rather, fixed and growth mindsets can be fostered, developed, and encouraged, depending on the way tasks are presented and evaluated. Although children can fall into one category or another based on questionnaires, they can also be pushed between categories through child-rearing and education.

The results of developmental psychology are confirmed in clinical psychology. For example, parenting books directed at laypeople describe this effect.¹⁶ In his bestselling book, Haim G. Ginott explains,

In psychotherapy, a child is never told, “You are a good little boy.” “You are great.” Judgmental and evaluative praise is avoided. Why? Because it is not helpful. It creates anxiety, invites dependency, and evokes defensiveness. It is not conducive to self-reliance, self-direction, and self-control, qualities that demand freedom from outside judgment. They require reliance on inner motivation and evaluation. *Children need to be free from the pressure of evaluative praise so that others do not become their source of approval.* (Ginott 2003, 30)

Sometimes children resist such compliments for their own protection. When children refuse to “accept the compliment,” a common phenomenon, they are resisting the pressure of evaluative praise.

Furthermore, according to Ginott, evaluative praise inspires guilt, which in turn leads to misbehavior to show one’s “true self.” For example, when children are praised for “being an angel” when they are actually thinking terrible things, they act out to allay their guilt for false praise. This misbehavior seems incongruous with the person praise they just received, perhaps leading parents to misjudge the cause.

Ginott is not advocating the removal of praise from child-rearing. On the contrary, he endorses what developmental psychologists call nongeneric or process praise:

¹⁶ I acknowledge that these sources are not sufficient evidence in support of my empirical data but rather motivation for considering the potential objection to virtue ethics.

When children are praised for their efforts, they become more persistent in difficult tasks.

. . . The single most important rule is that *praise deal only with children's efforts and accomplishments, not with their character and personality.* (Ginott 2003, 32)

In other words, process and product praise are more effective than person praise.

These issues of praise and blame can impact girls in particular, exacerbating gender disparities (Delston 2021; Bian, Leslie, and Cimpian 2017; Law et al. 2021; Malespina, Schunn, and Singh 2022; Lessard, Grossman, and Syme 2015). For example, gendered stereotypes about intelligence and genius are repeated by children starting around age six, with girls as likely as boys to pursue activities that emphasize these attributes at five but eschewing them by six (Bian, Leslie, and Cimpian 2017). These stereotypes have impacts long after childhood (Law et al. 2021). For example, one hypothesis as to why women are underrepresented in fields like philosophy and physics is that those fields place an undue emphasis on “brilliance,” which is both a whole-person, fixed-mindset attribution as well as one that is disproportionately given to men (Leslie et al. 2015; Malespina, Schunn, and Singh 2022). Thus, the issues at stake in this paper have direct influence on the lives and success of girls, women, and those coded female in society.

4. Complicating the Empirical Research

So far, I have argued that praise and blame ought to avoid character appraisal in discussions and that virtue ethics is committed to this approach for moral responsibility. However, this claim rests on empirical research and is therefore disprovable. If character appraisal turns out to be beneficial for children, then developmental psychology would offer us reason to think that virtue ethics succeeds over other standard moral theories in this regard. Do some studies show that it is beneficial? In this section, I consider evidence that appears to counter my empirical claims and argue that it does not.

Roger Jensen and Shirley Moore (1977) seem to show that attribution of character traits increases the manifestation of those traits in their landmark article, “The Effect of Attribute Statements on Cooperativeness and Competitiveness in School-Age Boys.” In the experiment, which demonstrates the historical gender bias of the field by focusing exclusively on boys for an unstated reason, attributions of cooperativeness encouraged the boys to help more than attributions of competitiveness. However, the precise language used to make the attribution focuses

primarily on behavior and not character traits, suggesting that the research more clearly favors the empirical research already stated.¹⁷

Joan Grusec and Erica Redler (1980) show that neither appraising behavior nor character appraisal is effective in five-year-olds, appraising behavior is less effective than character appraisal in eight-year-olds, and that they are equally effective in ten-year-olds. Thus, even if the study was sufficient to counteract the extensive data pulling in the opposite direction, character appraisal would only work for a very narrow range, possibly only for a single year in childhood, and at that time only producing a tiny effect. Other studies confirm this age distinction between five- to six-year-old children and eight- to nine-year-old children (Dix and Grusec 1983).

In a study that appears to contradict the effect described in this paper, Rosemary Mills and Joan Grusec (1989) conclude that dispositional praise had a bigger impact on how much children shared than did nondispositional praise about individual behavior. However, their statistical analysis shows that this effect is very narrow, with the authors also concluding,

There were no differences across the three praise conditions in the amount donated in the induction phase, with *ts* (36) ranging from .15 to .92, *n.s.* In the internalization phase, children donated significantly more after dispositional praise ($\Lambda^2 = 6.54$) than after either nondispositional praise ($M = 5.42$) or no praise ($\Lambda^2 = 5.08$), $f(36) = 2.73$, $p < .005$, one-tailed, and $f(36) = 3.56$, $p < .001$, one-tailed, respectively. (Mills and Grusec 1989, 307)

That is, in some conditions dispositional praise increased sharing, but in some conditions it did not, an effect confirmed in a second study in the same paper (Mills and Grusec 1989, 315). Since the experimenters cared less about the induction phase, in which sharing was induced in the first place, than the internalization phase, in which experimenters left the room to see how children would act while alone, the results are interpreted with this same emphasis. In addition, experimenters only focused on behavior and action, not dispositional attribution, to attempt to induce prosocial behavior. However, this emphasis on internalization rather than induction belies the

¹⁷ The attribution of cooperation is as follows: "According to this test it shows that you can really get along with others. It also shows that you can play fair, are willing to share, and don't get pushy with others. You would work well with others" (Jensen and Moore 1977, 305–6) The experimenters did not say, "According to this test it shows you are a very cooperative, fair, and generous person." As such, the experiment does not clearly fall into the category of person praise.

apparent evidence that focus on behavior and action may be particularly effective in altering decisions to share for the better.

Recent articles also argue that dispositional praise is effective at producing generous actions. Another discussion that undermines the proposal in the last section argues, “Labeling a person as having a prosocial disposition may at times be more effective than praising the prosocial act. Additionally, praising actors for their effort could be counterproductive” (Rudy and Grusec 2020, 108).¹⁸ And this discussion of a study by Julie Dunsmore hypothesizes that

children exposed to process-based attributions, however, may think that prosocial behavior during any particular opportunity might reflect less on their character than the circumstances of the moment. In other words, it is possible that process-focused feedback might communicate that effort and intentions are more important than immediate behavior. Though this message is productive in many areas, it may be counterproductive for prosocial behavior, for which outcomes may be difficult to quantify and sympathetic intentions may be considered important regardless of the effectiveness of the behavior. (Dunsmore 2015, 70)

The person-praise condition was to tell the children: “You seem like the type of person who is really kind and helpful and understands how other people feel.” The process-praise condition stated: “You seem to really work hard and pay attention so you can learn how other people feel” (Dunsmore 2015, 64–65). According to that same study, the person-praise group did not differ from the control group, so the significance was primarily in the process praise. Although both Dunsmore and Grusec and her coauthors label this second form of praise a type of “process praise,” thus using it to argue process praise is counterproductive to prosocial behavior, this attribution itself is unclear. Although the word “person” is eliminated, the praise still includes the phrase, “you seem . . .” which indicates generic praise about a person and not an individual action or effort. Thus, both conditions appear more like person praise than process praise.

¹⁸ Though this discussion includes a claim that “parents do not rely to any great extent on praise to promote prosocial behavior as compared to other forms of responses, at least with preschool and primary school children. Moreover, praise does not seem to facilitate prosocial behavior. . . . Research with young adults also suggests that prosocial values that have been internalized or intrinsically motivated are very rarely a result of learning occurring in the context of praise for prosocial action” (Rudy and Grusec 2020, 105).

The fact that encouragement is not effective in very young children (and may even be detrimental) is confirmed elsewhere (Warneken and Tomasello 2013, 2008). Other studies show that generic statements such as you “must enjoy helping others” are successful at increasing altruistic behavior in children, though not by much (Grusec et al. 1978). It may be that age plays a pivotal role in the type of appraisal that is effective with children.

In addition, many relevant tests compare character attribution to other forms of character attribution, to externalized reasons for behavior, or external rewards and not to character appraisal vs. behavior appraisal. Thus, they do not succeed as proper counterevidence to the claims discussed above.

One objection from Dweck and others to the empirical research discussed in the last section, as compared to the countervailing research discussed in this section, is that the research definitively opposing character attribution is focused on skill sets and amoral tasks, whereas the research defending character attribution looks directly at moral evaluation. In the literature, this question of the comparison between skills and morals is considered and not definitively answered—for example, “It is open to question whether or not dispositional and process-oriented praise function similarly in the prosocial realm” (Rudy and Grusec 2020, 107). If the human psyche draws a large distinction between moral and amoral tasks, the research on amoral tasks discussed in this paper would be irrelevant or inapplicable to virtue ethics. Of course, the ancients tend not to make such distinctions, viewing moral and amoral virtues as a type of excellence and using the same word (*arête*) for all, distinguishing only in type. But perhaps that is so much the worse for the ancients.

A major problem with the experiments discussed in this section and the last is that they are focused on lab settings, and as such, their results may not be able to be generalized to daily life at all. If so, longer-term studies and studies that more effectively incorporate evaluative speech into children’s lives would be needed to establish the empirical claims in either direction. In fact, Mark Alfano (2013, 90) calls the prosocial behavior that virtue-labeling produces “factitious virtue,” distinguishing it from those who express a virtuous internal state.

If telling children that they did not just act badly but are themselves bad people, or if taking a single good behavior witnessed in a child and generalizing it to personality traits is more motivating, what ought we to do with this information? After all, it is quite possible that telling someone that they are good or bad might be motivating in the short term but lead to negative consequences in self-concepts, guilt, motivation, and well-being later. If whole person attributions can damage the psyche, self-perception, and self-respect of a child, then we ought to be suspicious of them even if they lead to behavior we want to foster. For that reason, there is an asymmetry in the role of the empirical evidence on both sides of this debate. Using empirical research, I have proposed that growth mindset and focus on behavior lead to better

behavior without any costs. Empirical research on the other side of the debate suggests that there are costs and that fixed mindset or attributional praise and blame can lead to tiny increases in giving behavior. But these costs are minor. And attributional praise may pose a greater cost if it risks harming the individual's self-concept. So, the asymmetry is this: a tiny potential cost if we choose growth mindsets, and a huge potential cost if we choose fixed mindsets in our praise and blame of children.

Is it possible that telling someone they are a good artist or a bad one can lead to quitting behavior but telling them they are a good person or a bad one does not? Is it possible that we want to avoid fixed mindsets in technical skills but foster them in moral ones? With the acknowledgement that the empirical data could be wrong, inapplicable, or inconclusive, in the remainder of the paper, I consider whether the problems with character attribution and fixed mindset pose a problem for virtue ethicists.¹⁹

5. A Problem for Virtue Ethics?

These developmental and clinical psychologists' experiments and recommendations against character attribution suggest the danger for virtue ethics. Far from producing virtuous children, virtue ethicists' recommended ways of teaching children could make them more helpless, less self-reliant, and even more vicious. Furthermore, character attribution makes children more desirous and more dependent on external praise, pursuits that are unlikely to lead to satisfaction. If responsibility practices should, in the words of Mich Ciorria (2021, 161), "enhance agency" through an "agency-cultivation theory," then virtue ethics could do better on those counts. Since children can often be marginalized as children (Wiland 2018; Brennan 2003; Ciorria 2023a), and since schools can contribute to this problem with pedagogical approaches, this problem with agency cultivation could be larger than "individual agents and dyadic encounters" (Ciorria 2021, 174) and could also apply to systems and institutions. That reactive attitudes can directly uphold structural injustices, then, would not be a surprise, as Ciorria argues elsewhere, using an intersectional feminist analysis to explain "reactive attitudes as an enforcement mechanism of the domination contract" (Ciorria 2023b, 36; see also Hutchison 2018). In this case, the reactive attitudes are operating to harm as well as impose limitations on the oppressed group of children.

¹⁹ If the empirical evidence I rely on is false and virtue-attributions do help prosocial behavior, self-worth, and moral responsibility, then my conclusion does not change, since I am defending virtue ethics against this objection, which may turn out to be false. However, the evidence is complicated enough that I hope to have motivated the need to defend against this objection.

Furthermore, these studies demonstrate problems in virtue ethics in particular and not in morality as a whole. Virtue ethics uniquely asks us to focus on person evaluations, and so virtue ethics uniquely falls prey to the results of these studies. But, because the same focus is not required for moral evaluation in utilitarianism or deontology, these theories do not lead to the same dangers.

On the other hand, virtue ethicists easily fall into the trap of character appraisal when engaging in moral investigation, praise and blame, and moral education. Virtues, insofar as they are evaluative states, point away from growth mindsets and toward fixed ones. The very attribution of virtues to others leads to generic statements instead of nongeneric ones. And evaluation of virtue results in person feedback instead of product or process feedback.

Not only is virtue ethics committed to character appraisal in child-rearing in a way that competing theories are not, but it is also committed to offering direct advice, through practical and empirical recommendations. In other words, virtue ethicists do not offer a moral theory that can be applied in a variety of different ways; they tell us exactly how to apply it, which requires the use of virtue language and virtue states as the primary element in moral education, as I argued above. This form of direct action-guidance seems to inextricably link virtue ethics to the form of character appraisal I have shown to be harmful to children and their agency.

6. Why Virtue Ethics Does Not Fail on These Grounds

If virtue ethics is committed to performing actions that are demonstrably harmful, you might think that the theory is in trouble. Despite the persistence of some virtue ethicists' recommendations to appraise children in ways detrimental to their welfare or to generally overlook such dangers, I argue virtue ethics can easily circumvent this danger. It can do this by choosing an indirect route toward moral upbringing. In so doing, it has the added benefit of avoiding the sort of praise and moral attribution that can have sexist implications.²⁰

To circumvent this problem, virtue ethics first has to endorse the distinction between the criterion of morality—what makes a moral theory correct—and the method of education. In other words, what is pedagogically sensible to teach children might not be the most sophisticated or even accurate version of the theory. This idea is common in pedagogy; we sometimes teach children the wrong way to do something before we teach them the right way. A successful run on a tricycle or a

²⁰ For example, running a parallel argument about the plausibility of virtue ethics as empirically unsound, John Doris (2022, 2) argues empirical objections need not endanger the normative claims.

balance bike differs drastically from successful bicycle riding, but we teach them to children first as a stepping stone to cycling.²¹

This practice explains how educators can excise character appraisal from child-rearing with the goal of inculcating virtue. Those virtue ethicists, like Hursthouse, who are explicitly committed to character appraisal can easily sidestep the problem. They need only stop recommending whole-person evaluations. Instead of telling children to “be kind” or not to “be so greedy,” we can tell them to “play nice,” to “share,” or to “do what is generous.”

It is also easy to avoid overlooking the threat of character appraisal. Virtue ethicists need only consider, keep abreast of, and point us to the relevant literature in psychology as well as social justice. This demand is not a strong one. Virtue ethicists and, indeed, all moral theorists focused on child development need to take into account developmental psychology and oppression before making recommendations on moral upbringing, especially from a feminist perspective. Not to do so could be considered negligent. Thus, virtue ethicists who previously permitted character appraisal can update their tracts to explicitly forbid it.

I offered four reasons to think that virtue ethics is committed to character appraisal implicitly. I take each of these in turn. First, virtue ethics states that the evaluation of acts requires the evaluation of character. However, when addressing children, we can discuss, evaluate, and recommend actions *in accord* with virtue. For example, instead of teaching children that a truly virtuous action must proceed from a virtuous state, we can praise them for actions in accordance with virtue to habituate them into what we know will become a virtuous state later. Because Aristotle has already made this distinction, perpetuating it further is not a stretch.

Second, moral exemplars, role models, and idols can and should be avoided in child-rearing. Instead, we can point out actions in accord with virtue and hold these actions up to children as models of behavior. This approach to role models might have other benefits, such as excising the phrase, “Why can’t you be more like your sister.” Furthermore, it avoids the likely fallen idols that invariably ensue from putting someone on a pedestal.

²¹ Furthermore, it is also a viewpoint that is familiar in the ancients (*Republic* 415d). See also lies to friends (*Republic* 382c, 389b–c) and lies as drugs (459c–d, 389b). Pythagoreans required students to engage in a five-year silence as the start of their Pythagorean education (Iamblichus, *VP* 72) and argued that “not all things were to be spoken to all people” (Diogenes Laertius, VIII.15 [Huffman 2019, 280]). By separating the truth from what can be understood or the basis for moral evaluation from the justification used in moral upbringing, virtue ethicists can separate their moral theory from what they teach to children.

Next, habituation seems to require the direction of one's acts toward stable character traits, which requires evaluation of character. After all, "faking it until you make it" only works if you know what "it" is. However, this, too, can be avoided when it comes to child-rearing. For example, we can teach children to love the truth rather than teach them to be honest. We can also teach children to love a virtuous act for the sake of itself instead of for some further aim like the attaining of virtue. This approach has the further benefit of being a more successful approach to virtuous acts, since, after all, doing an act for its own sake is superior to doing it for some other goal.

Last, we know that self-knowledge is required for attainment of virtue. However, since you know your children, you can direct them accordingly. For example, if I know my children tend toward fear, I can direct them toward actions that seem to them to be rash so as to help them approximate bravery without indicating to them my appraisal of their characters. Of course, at some later date, they will need to learn their own characters.

Thus, all categories of virtue ethicists open to this criticism can easily circumvent it by paying careful attention to it. Merely by making their empirical advice indirect rather than directly oriented toward virtue, we have no reason to believe they cannot successfully attain the goal of virtue in moral education. An added benefit of this shift would be a more feminist approach to praise and blame that avoids a disproportionate negative impact on girls. And it would enhance moral responsibility of children's characters by helping them to achieve true virtue rather than fictitious virtue.

7. An Objection: Does the Removal of Virtue Language from Ethical Talk Lead to a Self-Effacing or Esoteric Theory?

Presumably, the best way to avoid making statements on children's character traits is to stop thinking about children in this way—as good children or bad, as brave children or wise children. Similarly, we should excise it from our books, movies, and television shows, where possible. This shift in thinking, however, means that to foster and facilitate virtue in society, we must make conscious efforts to prevent discussion of virtue. Does this shift mark a problem for virtue ethics? Is it a problem for virtue ethics that we must avoid it to achieve it?

Two potential problems arise for virtue ethics from my solution to this problem: first, it may lead to self-effacement, and second, it fails on simplicity grounds. In this section, I explain and evaluate these two possible problems. I then argue that this objection does not hold enough weight for it to rule out virtue ethics as a successful moral theory. Next, I argue that this objection is less damning for virtue

ethics than it would be for other theories. Last, I argue that if this objection does hold of virtue ethics, it is one shared with other ethical theories like utilitarianism.²²

The term “moral schizophrenia” comes from Michael Stocker (1976, 453–54),²³ but the charge dates back to Henry Sidgwick (1884, 485), who called such theories “esoteric,” and it was picked up by Derek Parfit (1986, 77), who used the term “self-effacing.” In other words, a theory of this type requires that people do not believe the theory. In this context, virtue ethics could more aptly be called esoteric (it is better if only responsible adults know it) as opposed to self-effacing (it is better if no one knows it). However, the objection is at root the same: theories that require we ignore them undermine themselves.

According to Stocker, the dichotomy between relying on virtue as the correct moral theory without permitting it to enter into moral education, praise, blame, or action guidance leads to what he calls a theoretical conflict. Stocker writes,

One mark of a good life is a harmony between one’s motives and one’s reasons, values, justifications. Not to be moved by what one values—what one believes good, nice, right, beautiful, and so on—bespeaks a malady of the spirit. . . .

. . . Any theory that makes difficult, or precludes, such harmony stands, if not convicted, then in need of much and powerful defense. (Stocker 1976, 453–55)

In fact, Stocker argues that the good life requires such a harmony, saying that if we are to lead a good life, “we should be moved by our major values and we should value what our major motives seek” (Stocker 1976, 454). Creating the distinction I have defended also seems to preclude the good life.

Certainly, whether or not Stocker’s concerns with a “malady of the spirit” hold true, virtue ethics runs into problems with simplicity. A theory that can be expressed in moral development is superior to one that needs to be suppressed, if only for the fact that it would need to rely on some other moral theory for the formative moral stages in life—a theory that must later be rejected. In fact, what virtue ethics seems to require to circumvent the criticism from developmental psychology can be

²² If you think this claim is successful, then my objection to virtue ethics goes much deeper than I admit. That is, developmental psychology poses a knockdown objection to virtue ethics, instead of posing, as I advocate here, a mere obstacle.

²³ Since this term has ableist implications, using a mental disorder as a metaphor for an undesirable characteristic in a theory, I henceforth avoid the term while considering Stocker’s underlying argument.

accurately characterized as an epicycle—a theory turning in small circles to achieve a larger purpose.

In this case, it is children who are most likely to suffer from the sort of “malady of spirit” Stocker suggests. However, it is not likely that children would have complete harmony between their motives and values anyway. In fact, before the age of reason and during development, values might be in flux. Perhaps the kind of moral watershed moment required by this revised version of virtue ethics is to be expected. Although this undermines the moral responsibility of children during development, it ideally sets them on a path to attain it later.

Does the solution I provide in this paper for virtue ethics fall prey to moral esotericism? After all, it requires that we ignore the theory in our dealings with children; it requires that moral education explicitly deny the view of the good we are aiming to impart, and it offers a theory of moral praise and blame that explicitly excises all virtue language. I argue that the answer to this question does not matter, because esotericism is insufficient to rule out virtue ethics as a successful moral theory. While this feature in a theory is not desirable, as Stocker points out, it also does not succeed as a knockdown argument against a view. We might be surprised to find out that the correct moral theory requires these machinations, but the mere act of denying it for the purposes of moral education should not speak against the truth of the theory itself.

In fact, it is the very emphasis on action guidance and practical advice that leads virtue ethics out of this objection. Even if it can no longer provide action guidance, becoming a good person is still possible, and that is what really matters. Because virtue ethicists aim to offer empirically helpful advice in becoming good, they are open to the suggestion that practical advice might temporarily contradict the theory in attributing praise and blame to agents. If we argue that denying the value of character in moral education is esotericism, then we may also be committed to the claim that virtue ethic’s classic dictum—overshoot the mean—is also esoteric. After all, it tells us that to achieve virtue, we should aim at vice. If such practical advice counts as evidence against a theory, virtue ethics can hardly get off the ground.

However, even if I concede not only that Stocker’s problem applies but also that it poses a deeper problem for a moral theory than I have admitted here, then virtue ethics is in the same boat as other moral views. Utilitarians may go so far as to say that following Kantian rules best maximizes the consequences. What makes these views remain consequentialist is that the justification for following Kantian rules is utilitarian.²⁴ Similarly, virtue ethics may recommend language on moral responsibility

²⁴ Mill accuses Kant of using consequentialist reasoning to defend the categorical imperative. This claim serves as such a successful objection to Kant because it turns Kant into a consequentialist.

that is opposed to the theory but remain virtue ethics because the justification for that shift appeals to virtue ethics reasoning in the first place.

Several notable philosophers advocate such solutions. For example, Peter Railton argues a sophisticated act-consequentialist may still rely on developing dispositions rather than performing detailed calculations in emergencies (Railton 1984, 157). We are better off developing dispositions that may turn out not to recommend the correct action on our preferred moral theory than not developing such dispositions at all. Similarly, Julia Driver defends an argument of a similar structure when she argues that partial norms may be justified by impartial evaluations, upsetting the standard characterization of utilitarianism as impartial, maximizing, and consequentialist in her article, “Consequentialism and Feminist Ethics” (Driver 2005, 193). Driver disassociates the “metalevel” theory from the theory itself, thereby maintaining the view that utilitarianism is itself impartial while availing itself of certain partiality.²⁵

In this section, I have argued that my solution for virtue ethics may very well fall prey to the claim of self-effacingness or esotericism. However, I argued, first, that this objection is not deeply problematic; second, that it is less problematic for virtue ethics than other theories; and third, that even if it is problematic, then it is in the same boat with other prominent and powerful moral views.

8. Conclusion

How ought we to praise and blame children? What is the best way to attribute moral responsibility to developing minds? These questions matter not only because a healthy sense of morality might require it but also because caretaking individuals are well advised to cultivate it well. Developmental psychology offers us grave warnings about the type of praise and blame virtue ethicists traditionally rely on to foster moral agency. In addition, these warnings have gendered implications, since they are particularly burdensome on female and feminine children. Therefore, a feminist approach is needed. So long as the empirical literature supports it, we ought to heed these warnings. Developing a growth mindset about morality is a valuable shift in fostering moral agency and requires limiting virtue ethical language when dealing out praise and blame, especially to achieve fairness for female and feminized children.

²⁵ The structure of this argument recalls Goodin’s argument for turning “general duties” into “special ones.” That is, since we have general duties to humanity, we rely on special duties to our compatriots to distribute these duties and ensure everyone is covered (Goodin 1988, 678). By comparison, partial duties for Driver are devices whereby impartial duties get assigned to particular agents.

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