

WHY MORAL EDUCATION STILL MATTERS: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND RENEWED PERSPECTIVES

Bernardo N. Caslib, Jr.
*University of the Philippines Manila
and Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines*

The recent proposal by policymakers in the Philippines to remove ethics instruction from all higher education curricula has raised questions about the continued relevance of moral education to the overall development of every individual. In this paper, I revisit the numerous issues and criticisms that have hounded moral education throughout time and various contexts. After which, a discussion of the philosophical foundation of moral education, most notably Aristotle's virtue ethics, is undertaken. Employing virtue ethics as an anchor, a discussion of character education as propounded by Thomas Lickona is offered. From here, I offer responses to the issues with moral education by drawing on the 11 principles of character education formulated by Lickona and other character educators based on their experiences with successful character education programs. I conclude this paper with a hopeful note that perhaps, rather than removing ethics from the curriculum, the Philippines may learn from the experiences of the successful moral education programs discussed in this paper, suggesting that reform and revitalization of moral education programs is the way forward.

Keywords: character education, education, ethics, moral education, virtue ethics

INTRODUCTION

One of the most startling issues within the education sector in the Philippines over the past months is the initiative of Philippine policy-makers to remove the teaching of Ethics as a required general education course across all higher-education institutions. Aside from the subtle assertion that the course may have been repetitive in higher education, given related required subjects in basic education, it can be surmised that the blatant preference for teaching direct, marketable skills rather than soft skills and dispositional attributes may be the primary motivation behind this initiative. While masked as an attempt to improve the lives of many Filipino families

by shortening higher education from what is customarily 4 to 5 years into 3.5 to possibly 4.5 years, the initiative is nothing but an attempt to get rid of humanities and other general education courses that are mistakenly thought to be dispensable to the total educational aims of higher education.

For example, in House Bill No. 2612, introduced by Hon. Kenneth T. Gatchalian in the Nineteenth Congress of the Republic of the Philippines, he intends to restructure college education by setting the standard duration for a bachelor's degree to no more than three years. While the bill was offered to notably simplify the structure of college education, it is apparent that the fundamental assumption rests on the claimed repetitiveness of general education subjects in college. Gatchalian contended that his proposal was believed to meet the acceptable college readiness standards prescribed by the Philippine Commission on Higher Education.¹ A similar bill was filed in the twentieth congress of the House of Representatives of the Republic of the Philippines by Representative Jennifer A. Lagbas of the First District of Misamis Oriental. All these attempts at further neglecting the holistic development of college students in the Philippines in favor of specialization have a truly detrimental effect on a genuinely humanistic formation of Filipinos.

In this paper, however, I do not intend to discuss the importance of general education in higher education. It was only mentioned insofar as Ethics is part of the current roster of required general education subjects for all Filipino higher education students. In addition, the discussion in this paper is not localized within the Philippine higher education context either. Instead, the plan is to explore a far-reaching issue that may be instrumental in understanding the perceived bias against the teaching of ethics in formal education. This article focuses on the issue of moral education and its continued relevance in higher education in the country. Aside from the issues of dispensability and redundancy that policymakers in the Philippines raise, I will revisit the most fundamental matters—not just ethics as a course in the Philippines, but also moral education, of which ethics is a part. While these issues, as I admit, are serious and should be addressed, I also intend to provide possible responses, and in the process, argue that moral education remains vital in the total education of every individual and that the educational endeavor promises serving its unique role in the ethical and holistic development of every learner especially when revisited and reformulated as one of the most adaptable learning areas in education.

The goal is achieved by reviewing the literature on moral education and identifying its critical positions and issues. After providing this, the paper proceeds with laying the philosophical foundations of moral education, most notably its Aristotelian groundwork. I briefly discuss moral education in Aristotle and, in a sense, the need to educate not just the mind but also the heart. This provides the needed anchor upon which I attach the educational approach called character education. From here, I address the issues raised against moral education and reaffirm its ongoing importance and adaptability to changing times by examining the principles of character education and how they address these issues. The paper concludes by emphasizing that, while issues exist in the sphere of moral education, reforms can improve its implementation and the attainment of its objectives, rather than its complete deletion from the education of every Filipino learner.

CRITICAL ISSUES AND CRITICISMS AGAINST MORAL EDUCATION

The problems that permeate moral education in the Philippines are not exclusive to us. The seeming staleness of moral education in the country is not an isolated case. A comprehensive review of the history and development of moral education worldwide explains why moral education has often seemed to stagnate or reach a dead end. Caslib (2025) writes that, worldwide, certain patterns in the teaching of moral education have emerged over time. In the Western world, for example, from direct instruction in moral dogmas to values clarification to character education, moral educators have continuously grappled with the ideal and most effective way to teach ethics and morality to learners. Moreover, moral education faces issues that can be classified as either philosophical or educational. Insufficiency in responding to these issues has either led to anti-moral education positions or the perception that moral education is stagnant. First, the philosophical issues that beset moral education concern the nature of morality as the supposed object of education. Some examples of these issues include questions about morality itself, the possibility of teaching and learning morality, and the proper purpose of such an education. The problems in education, meanwhile, concern how morality may be transmitted. Equally essential and axiomatic in addressing the issue at hand, the two sets of questions will be elaborated on in the following sections. Failure to address these issues may endanger both the plausibility and the continued relevance of moral education as a learning endeavor.

The first philosophical issue against moral education is the question of morality. If moral education is supposed to teach morality, the contents of this subject matter may be a little vague, if not ambiguous. The end upon which this education exists is likewise unclear. The exact nature of this morality, which must be taught and passed on to the next generation of students, may appear amorphous. Throughout the history of thought, numerous variants of morality and ethical systems have been proposed. Across the world, as gleaned from the history of moral education, many objectives and goals have been sought. Is there an objective morality that should be taught in moral education? In the Philippines, schools of various religious backgrounds have sought to anchor the moral education they implement in the religions they support. Is there a universal end of moral education? Is the end a set of knowledge claims or a set of skills or techniques? Moral education schools across time and space have argued along these two lines. Some thinkers have considered morality as a code of conduct decided on by or in accordance with the collective. Moral education, as conceived by this school of thought, is concerned with transmitting and inculcating the collective moral code or a community practice. On the other hand, the opposing view suggests that morality is related to individual modes of experience that every individual must undergo. Morality is a skillful process of confronting moral dilemmas and intelligently maneuvering the pathway towards a desired moral end. In the words of Chazan (1985), is morality “ultimately a specific *content* or *normative stance*, or rather a *process* or *procedure* that is defined by certain technical characteristics?” This fundamental distinction between the two views of morality will also result in two different modes of education.

As such, this first issue should be addressed to frame exactly what constitutes any possible success in moral education.

Another philosophical problem in moral education is the relationship between reason and morality. If moral education hopes to instill morality among its learners, the question, of course, is through what channel will learners absorb their learning, of and about morality. It is traditionally conceived that it is through the faculty of reason that human persons apprehend new information and knowledge. How can morality be considered knowledge? As the first view above suggests, morality is essentially a set of codes agreed upon within a society that every individual can cognitively adopt. Following this, morality is considered akin to scientific or historical knowledge that can be relayed in schools and directly apprehended by learners. The other view, meanwhile, suggests that morality is similar to mathematical skills or physical education abilities, which can be trained and honed in schools. Is reason's relationship with morality the same as its relationship with other subject matters in school?

Similarly, another philosophical challenge with moral education is the conception of a morally educated person. Without a clear understanding of who this person is, education might be off target. While this question has been a perennial challenge for philosophers of education for decades, it remains. Different moral education traditions have envisioned what a morally educated student might look like. Some traditions conceive of students who embodied a list of virtues; in some, a list of moral skills. Surely, the ideal student that an ethical education program wishes to produce helps provide direction and guidance on how moral education must be implemented.

The fourth issue is the educational issue, namely, the role of the teacher and the appropriate methods and procedures in moral education. What does it mean to be a teacher of morality? Is there any specific qualification, skill, or knowledge that is required of a teacher in morality or moral education? Does a moral exemplar automatically qualify? Moral educators are expected to understand the most complicated theories of morality. Does this mean that special training is required for moral educators? How about the methods of teaching? Can moral education be taught in the same way as language education or science education? Indeed, moral education has its own nuances that make its teaching distinctive. What materials, activities, and programs may be crafted to allow students to access materials properly? Without grappling with this question, moral education may not be appropriately implemented.

Disagreement with and inadequacy in responses to the above issues may have led to positions in the philosophy of education that are vehemently opposed to the moral education project.

One of the earliest and most enduring arguments against moral education is the claim that its object is not an objective body of knowledge. Discourse on morality, moral issues, and even moral knowledge is not objective in the same way that mathematical or scientific knowledge is. John Wilson (1969) argues that schools should teach only knowledge and ideas publicly verified and agreed upon. By this, he means those arguments for which there is widely held or accepted evidence. This evidence, according to Wilson, should be that "which any rational person would regard as sufficient" (Wilson 1969, 24-26). This position will ultimately exclude religion, morality, ethics, and the like, for they are obviously of a different epistemological

status than the sciences, mathematics, or even history. While latter fields of study peddle information that can readily be agreed upon based on either logic or empirical evidence, morality invites tons of disagreements, which may be taken to mean that the field is not a legitimate field of study. Given the wide divergence of takes on morality, there is serious doubt about what may be considered acceptable to teach in a moral education program. Many years later, in 2000, consistent with his early position, Wilson, in his article "Methodology and Moral Education" in the *Oxford Review of Education*, laments that moral education still lacks the methodological rigor to determine the way forward. Starting with the definition of moral education, Wilson argued that unless we are clear about what we mean and what we expect from moral education, it will never move forward. Consistent with Wilson's position, Carl Bereiter (1973), in his work "Must We Educate," argues passionately that moral education is improper because of its direct or indirect imposition of ideals, values, behaviors, and the views of school authorities, such as teachers, on students. For Bereiter, Wilson, and other like-minded philosophers of education, moral education is not a valid educational enterprise because it rests on vague, amorphous claims to knowledge and ultimately imposes values that are not legitimized by any collectively accepted epistemological truth.

Another anti-moral education stance is that moral education fails to enrich students' individuality. For the supporters of this position, children are to be treated as autonomous, free agents capable of committing to their own selfhood. Moral education hinders this process by imposing values and perpetuating ideas that advance the school's or, in the case of public education, the state's agenda. Public schools that forward a moral education agenda are seen as tools of imposition and manipulation of citizens. Spring (1975) notes that schools come into being as a means of shaping the moral and social beliefs of the population for the benefit of a dominant elite (Spring 1975, 10).

Moral education, contrary to its claim to emancipate individuals, impedes growth and maturity. By imposing values and ideals on students to imbibe, moral education inadvertently or inadvertently serves as an obstacle to individual students attaining the fruition of their identity and selfhood. In its most extreme form, Neil (1927) advances the thesis that moral education in schools should be halted altogether for moral advancement to be truly realized when he says, "I believe that it is moral instruction that makes a child bad. I find that when I smash the moral instruction a bad boy has received, he automatically becomes a good boy" (Neil 1927, 17). For philosophers like Neil, Spring, and many others like them, moral education, if done in schools, can be more harmful to the individual growth and development of its students.

For yet another group of anti-moral education philosophers, moral education is problematic because it subjugates the proletariat and promotes the social order that is beneficial only to the ruling class. This is the socialist argument against moral education. For them, moral education constitutes nothing but the attempt "to perpetuate already set patterns of social relationships of economic life and to facilitate the integration of youth into the labor force" (Bowles & Gintis 1976, 28). For them and this school of thought, moral education is a device of the capitalist order, designed to pacify and manipulate its citizens into becoming subdued members of society. The content of schooling, including moral education, along with the hidden curriculum latent in its methods, strategies, and content, all point to the need for the capitalist order to suppress differing views in line with the maintained hierarchical power relations of

the capitalist mentality. In contrast to the subjugating and oppressive ethic, they strive to uphold a socialist ethic that enables students to promote egalitarianism, the value of physical labor, and the dignity of workers. While not directly attacking moral education, this argument attacks the very design of moral education as it is commonly construed in the liberal order.

As early as the 1960s, the developmental moral philosopher Lawrence Kohlberg had already asserted that moral education in schools is a waste of time. According to Kohlberg, moral education has stagnated in American education for decades. It was concluded that while moral education, in theory, is a worthwhile endeavor, in actual practice, moral education isn't productive. Its aims are just not realizable. In school, there is so little time; teachers aren't trained enough to handle the class, and there is just too much pressure from the state and society to produce good students. According to studies conducted by similar philosophers and psychologists during Kohlberg's time, schooling and moral instruction may have little effect on students' actual moral growth. Morality is too complex to be confined to a single box and taught in schools. The same conclusion has been drawn even to this day. Kevin Ryan exposes that moral education programs in schools have been failing tremendously (Ryan 2013, 141). He conjectures that the flawed concept of character might be one of the reasons for this failure all along. Additionally, he mentions the "failure to link character formation to deeper human issues" and "the lingering legitimacy question of placing the control of the education of the young in the hands of the state" as possible perpetrators and causes of moral education's failure as an endeavor. He proposes that an effective moral education should occur only when it is linked to students' actual and deeper goals and purposes, and is directed toward cultivating virtues (Ryan 2013, 145). What are these virtues that students ought to acquire, and how are they to be taught?

The article "How to Teach Moral Theories in Applied Ethics" in *The Journal of Medical Ethics* by Ben Saunders (2010) articulates another issue with moral education. In it, Saunders argues for a pedagogy that is not simply theory-laden but focused on the 'how' of teaching moral reasoning (Saunders 2010, 635). Aware of the current practice of teaching numerous moral theories or concepts in basic education, Saunders argues for an alternative approach to moral education that does not place such a strong emphasis on theories. He suggests "building up to moral theories rather than taking them as a starting point" (Saunders 2010, 637). For Saunders, moral theories should not be the "alpha and omega of moral thinking" (Saunders 2010, 635). Classes should begin with actual moral issues and from there, build on the systemic theories of moral reasoning. While Saunders has a fixed gaze on the 'how' of moral reasoning, a further question remains. What should be the more rudimentary content that should be taught in an ethics class if skills are what truly matter?

Finally, Peter Meindl, Abigail Quirk, and Jesse Graham argue in the article "Best practices for School-Based Moral Education" in *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences* that school-based moral education (the traditional kind) does not work. Given the need to engage in moral education, a survey of current studies was done. The recommendation is to emphasize hidden or "stealthy" moral education practices and a small set of "master" virtues (Meindl et al. 2018, 5). Studies indicate that the direct teaching of moral virtues is ineffective, and knowledge of virtues is not necessarily sufficient to act virtuously. Stealthy methods and focus on particular

virtues are the way to go. What stealthy methods might work, and what specific virtues should be taught?

In this section of the paper, I have examined the significant issues raised against the moral education project. These are both philosophical and educational. There are questions about the kind of morality expected in a moral education project, the relationship between reason and morality, the ideal of a morally educated individual, and the role of pedagogy and the methods of moral education. Inadequate responses to these issues and difficulties may have contributed to sentiments against moral education. These sentiments may be roughly grouped into several arguments. They are the argument against the notion of moral education and its unverifiable notions and concepts, the antithetical nature of moral education to the growth of individuality among its learners, its alleged hampering of human flourishing in a capitalist society by reinforcing capitalist structures, its failure to produce any genuine results, and its hyperfocus on theories, rather than practice.

Given these issues with moral education, what may be a way out? Is there a conceptual framework that can address the problems in moral education? While these issues are all valid and urgent, they may be considered areas for necessary reform instead of grounds for abandoning an otherwise necessary educational project. The next section lays the foundation for moral education, inviting consideration of some possibilities.

PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF MORAL EDUCATION

In the previous section, I conclude with lamentations about the current state of moral education and a hopeful view that the perceived weaknesses may be seen as challenges that open the way for possible improvement of moral education as a salient educational undertaking. One suggestion by Ryan (2013) is to focus on the relationship between theories and deep-seated human issues that students can truly relate to and understand, and secondly, to look towards character education for hope and possibilities. Character education has been one of the most recent developments in the literature of moral education. While the notion of ‘character’ has always been part of the classical treatment of moral education (i.e., Aristotelian Virtue Ethics), its taking a back seat in moral education in favor of other approaches, most prominently religion, values clarification, and cognitive development models, has appeared final for a time. In the West, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom, the concept of ‘character’ has received renewed interest and concern for quite a while. National educational policies have been made to advance the theory. Universities have established institutes to focus on scholarship and research on this area, the most prominent of which is the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, based at the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom. Despite its limitations, the character education movement is considered the most potent form of moral education in today's society. The task is to make it more robust, answerable to issues, both philosophical and pedagogical, and more responsive to the call of the times.

Thomas Lickona who is a developmental psychologist and founder-director of the Center for the 4th and 5th Rs (Respect and Responsibility) at the State University of

New York at Cortland and dubbed as the “father of modern character education” specifies what is character education, its entailments, and its issues in one of the chapters in the book, *Character and Moral Education* (2011). In his chapter entitled “Character Education,” Lickona discusses the nature of character education, its goals, the psychological components of character education, the content of character, a comprehensive approach to character development, and offers suggestions on how schools of education can prepare effective character educators. He prefaces the entire chapter with a treatment of the relationship between character and virtue. Lickona (2011) defines character education as “the deliberate effort to cultivate virtue” (Lickona 2011, 24). The end goal of all forms of character education is the development of good character in students. Good character, meanwhile, is nothing but the amalgamation of all the virtues that an individual possesses. As such, the task of character education can be summed up as an education for virtues. Character education involves making sure that learners imbibe virtues. Indeed, the idea behind this is that if one is a virtuous person, then actions will follow; thinking, discussing, deliberating, and even analyzing ideas are important, but for character education, behavior is the “ultimate measure of character” (Lickona 2011, 24). Resonating with the Aristotelian corpus, virtues are not just thoughts or given tendencies. They are habits formed through repeated virtuous deeds. The purpose of acquiring them is to practice and become good at them. Aristotle puts it best, “we are not conducting this inquiry in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, else there would be no advantage in studying it” (Aristotle, ca. 340 B.C.E./1962, 1103b30). Character education envisions making students imbibe virtues to make their dispositions and actions ethical. “The more virtues we possess, the more fully we possess them, the stronger our character” (Lickona 2011, 23). It seems clear that character education is nothing but education for virtues. This moral education program, then, is grounded nowhere else but in virtues.

VIRTUES, ARISTOTLE, AND CHARACTER EDUCATION

Because it has been asserted in the previous section that character education as a promising variant of moral education is founded ultimately on the teaching and learners’ acquisition of virtues, I will endeavor to explain in this section what a virtue is, first by going back to Aristotle and his seminal work on this matter, the *Nicomachean Ethics*. I have to qualify that Aristotelian virtue ethics is just one form of Virtue Ethics, even in the ancient world. While many other virtue philosophers trace their inspiration and theoretical origins to Aristotle, including the Divine Doctor, Saint Thomas Aquinas, that does not mean that Aristotle’s is the only virtue tradition in the classical world. Some philosophers, such as Julia Annas, disagree with this privileging and argue that “treating Aristotle as authoritative for virtue ethics fails to do justice even to the ancient tradition” (Annas 2010, 16). Be as it may, much of the literature in virtue ethics owes so much to the framework first advanced by Aristotle. As such, his account will serve as the primary framework for virtue ethics that I will adopt in this study. Other philosophers of virtue, such as Thomas Aquinas, and those from the contemporary world, such as Michael Slote, Rosalind Hursthouse, Linda Zagzebski,

and Alasdair MacIntyre will be mentioned as needed, but the main framework used in this paper is that of the original systematic virtue ethicist, Aristotle. Employing Aristotle's corpus, the anatomy of virtues will be briefly outlined, encompassing the two primary types of virtues: moral and intellectual virtues. The relationship between moral and intellectual virtues will be tackled later.

Virtues are excellences in human persons that help them attain the fullness of themselves, their proper end or *telos*, their *eudaimonia* or flourishing. Aristotle begins the *Nicomachean Ethics* by declaring that

[e]very art or applied science and every systematic investigation, and similarly every action and choice, seem to aim at some good; the good, therefore, has been well defined as that at which all things aim (Aristotle NE, 1094a).

All endeavors that human beings engage in are moving towards this good, that is, the end goal of all human actions. Aristotle continues that this good is nothing else but happiness. He clarifies that by *eudaimonia*, "[a]s far as its name is concerned, most people would probably agree: for both the common run of people and cultivated men call it happiness, and understand by 'being happy' the same as 'living well' and 'doing well'" (Aristotle NE, 1095a15). To get to this state of being happy and doing well, one must first attain what is often referred to as virtue or excellence. One can only be truly happy and do well if one lives their life according to an excellence befitting the kind of being they are. The end of a bamboo tree differs from the end of a fish and, more significantly, from the end of a human person, because the differences in their being determine their proper functions and, subsequently, their fitting ends. As human persons are endowed with rationality, their proper function then, "consists in an activity of the soul in conformity with a rational principle or, at least, not without it" (Aristotle NE, 1098a5). In pursuit of the goal of achieving *eudaimonia*, the human person must strive for an excellence that is fitting for their being. "The good of man is an activity of the soul in conformity with excellence or virtue, and if there are several virtues, in conformity with the best and most complete" (Aristotle NE, 1098a15). For human persons to achieve happiness, their fitting end, they must first live life in accordance with virtue. Unlike values that are highly subjective and depend on so many other factors, such as one's culture, one's background, one's family, one's geographical location, and temporal existence, virtues are objectively good qualities. They are beneficial for any individual because they make sure that their bearer has everything that they need to fulfill their own life, to succeed in reaching a flourishing life.

Human virtues are either moral or intellectual virtues. According to Aristotle (NE, 1098a), what truly demarcates human persons from all other species in the world is their mode of being, the rational element that obeys reason and another part that possesses reason. For Aristotle, human virtue largely depends on the form of a being, on what a being truly is, as defined by its form. In the case of the human person, their being and form are determined by their soul. According to Aristotle, a human being's soul consists of two elements, one irrational and one rational. Under the irrational part of the soul, there are two elements again. One part "seems to be common to all living things and vegetative in nature" (Aristotle NE, 1102a30) and is in charge of nurture

and growth. This element is something that all animals share with plants. Plants are also capable of growth and vegetation. This element does not partake in reason, as growth is not within the realm of reason. No amount of reasoning and thinking will make one grow. On the other hand, the other integral element under the irrational part of the soul, while irrational, “still does partake of reason in some way” (Aristotle NE, 1102b10) as far as it follows the counsels of reason. This part of the soul is in charge of appetite and desire, the sensitive soul. As such, an individual can either comply with reason in a particular situation or not, as determined by the sensitive soul. An individual may choose to eat an entire bowl of rice despite being full or not. These two elements of the soul that have to do with our proper end as human persons correspond to the two kinds of virtues. The rational part of the soul, when perfected, attains intellectual virtues. The element of the irrational part that partakes in reason, we call moral virtues.

Moral virtues are the paradigmatic targets of moral education. Moral virtues are virtues that are formed by habit. They are virtues that are formed every time the sensitive soul, that part of the irrational soul that shares in reason, actually heeds the counsel of reason. A student who resists the temptation to cheat in an exam to obtain better grades out of reverence for honesty and fairness is an individual whose sensitive soul, while desiring the pleasurable rewards of cheating (i.e. good grades), still follows the dictates of reason (i.e. resist cheating) and as consequence, if done habitually, will develop the virtue of temperance and honesty. Moral virtues are destroyed by defect and by excess and are preserved by the mean. The mean has to be carefully chosen by an individual for her to qualify as a virtuous person.

An action for Aristotle is rendered virtuous if the agent who commits the said action is one of virtue. They must be a person of full knowledge of what they are doing, and their disposition is what allows them to make the choice. This choice, according to Aristotle, has to be the mean between two extremes. By this means, Aristotle remarks poignantly,

Thus, we can experience fear, confidence, desire, anger, pity, and generally any pleasure and pain, either too much or too little, and in either case not properly. But to experience all this at the right time, toward the right objects, toward the right people, for the right reason, and in the right manner---that is the median and the best course, the course that is a mark of virtue. (Aristotle NE, 1106b20)

In every action or situation individuals find themselves in, they must strive to locate the right amount only. Too much fear is cowardice; too little is audacity, but to fear at the right time, toward the proper object, toward the right people, for the right reason, and in the proper manner, that is courage, one of the hallmark moral virtues in Aristotle. Aristotle (NE, 1107a) summarizes what virtue is by stating that it is a characteristic that involves choice and is concerned with the mean relative to us and is determined by reason. It is a mean between two extremes: excess and deficiency. Given that being morally virtuous is a product of choice, how can moral virtues be taught in schools? How can schools ensure that their learners consistently choose the middle ground between extremes?

In Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle confronted the other kind of virtue, intellectual virtues. Recalling the other kind of virtue, Aristotle reiterates that moral virtues are settled by what reason dictates. It is consequently incumbent upon individuals who wish to attain moral virtue to make sure that their reason is in the right place, or in other words, they have excellent thought or understanding. Similar to the two divisions that Aristotle makes within the irrational part of the soul, the rational part of the soul may also be bifurcated. Aristotle maintains,

Let it be assumed that there are two rational elements: with one of these we apprehend the realities whose fundamental principles do not admit of being other than they are, and with the other, we apprehend things which do admit of being other...Let us call one the scientific and the other the calculative element. (Aristotle NE, 1139a5-10)

In matters of choosing the mean between two excesses in an attempt to hit what is morally virtuous, the second part of the rational soul acts in making sure that the desire is right. Imagine a group of politicians who have been offered a bribe for a permit to operate a business that will both offer employment opportunities to their constituents, but at the same time endanger a staggering amount of land occupied mostly by indigenous Filipinos. Will they accept the bribe? Will they provide the permit to operate? Because the answer is not as exact as the answers in sciences and logic, it is not the first part of the rational soul that steps forward. It is the second element that assumes responsibility for ensuring that the desires of these politicians (e.g., for more livelihood opportunities for their people or multimillion-peso bribes) are aligned with reason. For Aristotle, "...good and bad action in human conduct are not possible without thought and character" (Aristotle NE, 1139a35) and because "truth is the function of both intellectual parts (of the soul), those characteristics which permit each part to be truthful as possible will be the virtues of the two parts" (Aristotle NE, 1139bb10). To attain moral virtues, then, an individual must first hone her intellectual virtue to direct her towards doing what is right. After all, as Aristotle puts it, "virtue in the full sense cannot be attained without practical wisdom (Aristotle NE, 1144b20). Intellectual virtue comes first if one wishes to attain moral virtues at all.

RECONCILIATION: THE RELEVANCE OF MORAL EDUCATION TODAY

Having thoroughly examined virtue ethics and its component conceptual parts, one can now approach the more critical question: how does virtue ethics, along with its intellectual offspring, character education, respond to the criticisms against moral education? The issues surveyed earlier should not be seen as adequate bases to discard moral education in the curriculum; instead, these considered lapses are opportunities for reform and improvement of moral education as a worthy field. When reoriented properly, moral education reclaims its inherent worth in the total education of every

individual. Is character education in a position to forward this improved moral education agenda?

To recollect, the issues raised against moral education include the type of morality expected in a moral education project, the relationship between reason and morality, the ideal of a morally educated individual, and the question of pedagogy and methods of moral education. The corollary arguments are the argument against the notion of moral education and its unverifiable notions and concepts, the antithetical nature of moral education to the growth of individuality among its learners, its alleged hampering of human flourishing in a capitalist society by reinforcing capitalist structures, its failure to produce any genuine results, and its hyperfocus on theories, rather than practice. All these issues are adequately addressed by character education as a framework for moral education.

Character education, according to moral educators Thomas Lickona, Eric Schaps, and Catherine Lewis (2011, 30), is an “intentional effort to develop in young people core ethical and performance values that are widely affirmed across cultures.” This means that character education is a targeted moral education framework that aims to develop a certain combination of universal values across time and geographical locations among learners. While there is no single formula for implementing character education, there are some fundamental principles that form the cornerstone of the Character Education Partnership’s philosophy on initiating, engaging, and implementing successful character education programs in schools. These eleven principles serve as a guiding light that educational institutions and organizations concerned with character development can use for their purposes. The eleven principles are the following:

1. The school community promotes core ethical and performance values as the foundation of good character.
2. The school defines “character” comprehensively to include thinking, feeling, and doing.
3. The school uses a comprehensive, intentional and proactive approach to character development.
4. The school creates a caring community.
5. The school provides students with opportunities for moral actions.
6. The school offers a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners, develops their character and helps them succeed.
7. The school fosters students’ self-motivation.
8. The school staff is an ethical learning community that shares responsibility for character education and adheres to the same core values that guides the students.
9. The school fosters shared leadership and long-range support of the character education initiative.
10. The school engages families and community members as partners in character-building efforts.
11. The school regularly assesses its culture and climate the functioning of its staff as character educators, and the extent to which its students manifest good character.

Going through the principles above provides for an adequate response to the issues hurled against moral education.

As a response to the first and second issues regarding the vagueness of moral education's object and the relation between reason and morality, character education proposes a clear and distinct educational object that can serve as the actual target of the academic project. Character education helps its learners develop human qualities that are considered crucial in the total formation of every human person. These qualities are deemed true across time and different cultural backgrounds. These are values that "affirm human dignity, promote the development and welfare of the individual, serve the common good, and define our rights and responsibilities in a democratic society, and meet the classical tests of universality, and reversibility" (Lickona et. al. 2011, 31). However, aside from instilling these universal values, character education also aims to help students understand why these values ought to be upheld, learned, and practiced. The hope is that understanding why these values are virtues worth acquiring will allow the learners to adopt them and choose to live up to them when opportunities for choice arise. As such, the goal of every moral education for character development is both the acquisition of particular values considered universal, and at the same time, it expects learners to instantiate these values when necessary, using their reason when the need arises. Moral education then becomes not just of content, but also the skill to go through life given said virtues through the proper exercise of reason.

The allegation that many moral education programs lack agreement on who a morally educated person might be is also addressed sufficiently by a character education approach. The second principle of effective character education defines "character" comprehensively and rather holistically for every learner, spanning the trifocal aspects of thinking, feeling, and doing. An ideally morally educated person understands, cares about, and acts upon fundamental ethical values determined by a character education framework. Students learn virtues by studying them in class, observing cases and models where these virtues are applied, and solving moral problems and issues involving these values. As learners grow in character, they gain a deeper understanding of these universal values and subsequently develop a strong commitment to live out these values, leading to a tenacious tendency to behave in accordance with them.

The issue of the role of teachers and the methods of teaching morality has also been addressed by character education. The eighth principle of character education ensures that school staff, not just teachers, become an ethical learning community that shares responsibility for character education and upholds the same core values that students are expected to learn. Consistent with Aristotelian ethics, every school personnel member becomes a good friend who mirrors the students and hopes to help them develop their virtues, thereby completing their character. In many institutions where successful character education programs have been implemented, school staff not only serve as models worthy of emulation but are also provided opportunities to reflect on issues that affect their pursuit of the good and the good life. Faculty meetings and support groups are not just spaces to discuss work and outside work issues. They

also serve as avenues for discussing issues of character and behavior within and outside schools (Lickona et al. 2022, 34).

Despite the seeming strict educational programming of many character education endeavors, this moral education program does not fail to enrich individuality nor subjugate autonomy, as alleged by anti-moral education thinkers. Instead, schools empower students to shine and make something of themselves. By offering a meaningful and challenging curriculum that respects all learners and develops their character, regardless of their backgrounds and needs, learners discover relevant subject matters, content, and skills that naturally spark their interests and, consequently, engagement and achievement. In contrast to the fear that moral education may turn into indoctrination, schools adopting the character education approach work with learners to develop their understanding of rules, values, virtues, and their awareness of how their behaviors affect others. This development empowers students to pursue character excellences and virtues that will allow them to act responsibly and ethically in the future.

After successfully addressing the issues and arguments against moral education, character education has proven to be a viable and plausible alternative, capable of contributing to the realization of all aims. Moral education remains a vital component of a holistic education in any healthy society that advocates for inclusiveness, dialogue, and critical thinking and judgment.

CONCLUSION

The challenges to moral education as a field of study and as an educational endeavor have been persistent and are not just localized to the Philippines. Aside from the economic issues, in the case of the proposed removal of ethics teaching in higher education in the Philippines, several more significant philosophical and educational concerns have been raised regarding moral education over time and across various contexts. They have been surveyed in this article to provide a response and offer suggestions and possibilities. To provide a more nuanced response to these criticisms, the foundational concepts in moral education have been elucidated, particularly the notion of virtue that gave rise to character education. Because of its sheer intellectual influence, Aristotle's variant of virtue theory was discussed comprehensively in this paper. It has been pointed out that Aristotle's teleological model of ethics offers a better understanding of how and why moral education, as an educational endeavor, is truly rooted in enabling individuals to attain the fullness of their humanity. It has also unmasked how moral education programs should focus more on enhancing learners' humanity by introducing them to a particular variant of moral education, the character education approach. The approach, as proposed by Lickona and others, has proven effective in addressing concerns about moral education. Despite this, however, there remains a further challenge of actual implementation in Philippine schools, given the limitations in resources (time allocation for moral education in schools, sufficient training for personnel, adequacy of learning materials, etc). As the study of philosophy progresses, there is a growing need for philosophers doing work in education to join hands with educators in this country to raise the bar in education and to help the next

generation of Filipinos attain not just technical know-how, but moral competency that this country is truly in dire need of. As for the teaching of the course Ethics in Philippine higher education, the debates continue. As former Commission on Higher Education Chair Popoy De Vera lamented in his opinion piece last September², we truly need to take a second look at our current GE program, but definitely not abolish it, as it does not serve a national purpose. Indeed, teaching less ethics does not serve any national purpose.

NOTES

1. HOUSE BILL NO. 2612, otherwise known as “an act providing for a three-year specialization-focused college education in the Philippines and authorizing the commission on higher education to allow flexibility to reduce college academic years,” was introduced by Hon. Kenneth T. Gatchalian on the first regular session of the Nineteenth Congress of the House of Representatives of the Republic of the Philippines.

2. Popoy De Vera argues for the retention of the current general education program in an opinion piece that appeared in *The Philippine Star* last September 20, 2025: https://www.philstar.com/opinion/2025/09/20/2474075/general-education-ge-program?utm_source=chatgpt.com

REFERENCES

- Annas, Julia. “The Structure of Virtue.” In *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, edited by Michael R. DePaul & Linda T. Zagzebski, 15-33. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Martin Ostwald. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1962.
- Bereteir, Carl. *Must We Educate?*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973.
- Bowles, Samuel & Herbert Gintis. *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life*. New York: Basic Books, 1976
- Caslib, Bernardo N., Jr. “Rethinking Moral Education: Unpacking Its Foundations and Relevance.” *SUKISOK Journal of the Arts and Sciences* 5, no. 2 (2025): 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16980250>. Accessed: September 30, 2025.
- Chazan, Barry. *Contemporary Approaches to Moral Education*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1985.
- Lickona, Thomas. *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility*. New York: Bantam Books, 1991.
- Lickona, Thomas. “Character Education Seven Crucial Issues.” In *Character and Moral Education*. Edited by Joseph L. DeVitis & Tianlong Yu. Lausanne: Peter Lang, 2011, 23-29.
- Lickona, Thomas. “What Is Good Character and How Can We Develop It?” *Reclaiming Children and Youth* 23, no. 4 (2015): 27–32.

- Lickona, Thomas, Eric Schaps, & Catherine Lewis. "Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education." In *Character and Moral Education*. Edited by Joseph L. DeVitis & Tianlong Yu. Lausanne: Peter Lang, 2011, 30-35.
- Lickona, Thomas, Eric Schaps, & Catherine Lewis. "Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education." *Journal of Moral Education* 25, no. 1 (1996): 93–100.
- Meindl, Peter, Abegail Quirk, & Jesse Graham. "Best Practices for School-Based Moral Education." *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 5, no. 1 (2018): 3-10. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1177/237273217747087> Accessed: September 18, 2025.
- Neil, Alexander. *The Problem Child*. New York: Robert McBride, 1927.
- Norlock, Kathryn J. "Analyzing Aristotle's Virtue Ethic: Commentary on Song et al. (2025)." *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology* 45, no. 1 (2025): 43–48. <https://philpapers.org/rec/NORAAV> Accessed: September 28, 2025
- Ryan, Kevin. "The Failure of Modern Character Education." *Revisita Española de Pedagogía* 71, no. 254 (2013): 141-146.
- Saunders, Ben. "How to teach Moral Theories in Applied Ethics." *Journal of Medical Ethics* 36, no. 10, (2010): 635-638.
- Spring, Joel. *A Primer of Libertarian Education*. New York: Black Rose Books, 1975.
- Suroso, S., and F. Husin. "Analyzing Thomas Lickona's Ideas in Character Education (A Library Research)." *Proceedings of the 7th FIRST 2023 International Conference on Global Innovations (FIRST-T3 2023)*. Atlantis Press, 2024, 39–47. https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-220-0_5 Accessed: October 27, 2025.
- Wilson, John. "Education and Indoctrination". In *Aims in Education*. Edited by Thomas Henry Basil Hollins. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1969, 24-46.