

Julia Annas, Darcia Narvaez and Nancy Snow (eds.):
Developing the Virtues. Integrating Perspectives

New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. Hardcover
(ISBN 9780190271466) €56. 309 + xii pp.

Sveinung Sundfør Sivertsen¹

Accepted: 8 March 2017 / Published online: 16 March 2017
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In the introduction to this collection of essays on the development of virtue, the editors Julia Annas, Darcia Narvaez and Nancy Snow write that “[v]irtue is by nature an interdisciplinary affair” (p. 1). Narvaez’ own contribution is chosen as lead chapter because “it offers an example and sets the tone for the kind of interdisciplinary work we hope to encourage with this volume” (p. 3). The choice is unfortunate, and not reflective of the other contributions to the volume. Not because Narvaez’ work is not interdisciplinary (it is), nor because she is not suitably rousing in the role of the bold visionary (she is). The problem with Narvaez’ essay is that it suffers from (at least) two fallacies.

Narvaez argues for the importance of childcare in the development of virtue. Two claims are central to her argument: 1) we humans developed to take care of our offspring in a certain way, and 2) much modern malaise results from the lack of such care. Both of these claims might be true, and much of what Narvaez writes is interesting and important. Here, however, she slips into fallacy, with 1) taking the shape of the Golden Age fallacy, and 2) the Single Cause fallacy. The Golden Age in question is the “99%” of human evolutionary history where we lived in Small-Band Hunter-Gatherer (SBHG) communities in purported harmony with nature (p. 18). If we only learn from this long period how we are really supposed, that is *evolved*, to care for our children, a trend of progressively destructive human behaviour can be reversed – or so the argument seems to go. The single cause which is supposed to explain our current woe is thus the failure of actual childcare to conform to Narvaez’ ideal, which she terms the “Evolved Developmental Niche” (EDN, p. 17).

I am in no position to decide either of these issues, but the assumption that there was a time when all humans lived in harmony with nature appears to be undermined by evidence that early human hunter-gatherers played some role in rendering extinct the world’s megafauna

✉ Sveinung Sundfør Sivertsen
sveinung.sivertsen@uib.no

¹ University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway

(Sandom et al. 2014). In any case, is it not more plausible to say that we have always been both wise and stupid, rapacious and respectful, in harmony with nature and dangerously out of kilter? Instead of yearning for a time that (very likely) never was (p. 18), should we not learn from the best among us in all ages? Admitting this Aristotelian point, we could still learn from human history *pre* Aristotle, and Narvaez could still argue in favour of “EDN-consistent care” (p. 18) on the basis of evidence from SBHG communities past and present.

In addition, she would be better placed to answer how hunter-gatherer-childcare is to be implemented without reversing a century of struggle for gender equality. The Golden Age fallacy is not just fallacious, it is reactionary. The fact that Narvaez cites the book *The Hours* – which questions, among other things, whether women are free to live lives of their own choosing – only as an illustration “of mothers who did not deeply bond with their children as a result of [bad] hospital practices” (p. 20) reinforces the unfortunate (and I am sure unintended) reactionary impression.

Of course, if it *were* true that the way we raise our children is the ultimate cause behind all the ills mentioned by Narvaez (hedonism, materialism, narcissism, apathy, and “epidemics of diseases in mental, physical, and social health in Americans”, p. 20), then maybe we should forget about gender equality. Fortunately or unfortunately, there is little reason to think that things are so simple – there seldom is, which is why the temptation to trace complex effects back to a single cause has earned the label of fallacy.

Finally, Narvaez appears to equate flourishing in the Aristotelian sense with optimal “species-typical” functioning, where what is species-typical is defined by life in contemporary and/or prehistoric SBHG communities (pp. 15–20). While I am hesitant to add the Naturalistic fallacy to my list of accusations, neither the assumption that there is a human *telos*, nor the assumption that it lies in the community life of the hunter-gatherer are above criticism.

That said, the issue of proper childcare certainly deserves attention, including in the context of virtue development. Luckily, the three subsequent chapters do much to substantiate and nuance Narvaez’ insistence on the importance of early childhood experiences, and Daniel Lapsley in particular does a good job of correcting the bad first impression by his meditations on the interplay and boundary between psychology and philosophy (p. 38), and his care to discuss whether the “social-cognitive” approach to understanding moral identity is “philosophically responsible” (p. 55).

Formal considerations thus squared away, Robert Emde trains his gaze on the infant’s smile, drawing up an image of the importance of non-verbal interactions between infant and caregivers to early moral development (p. 74–77). Ross A. Thompson & Abby S. Levine give a melancholy tinge to this image with their survey of the impact of stress in early life (pp. 95–103), but lighten the mood again by showing how dialogue is more effective than discipline in helping shape the conscience of the child (p. 107). Where the psychologists of these three chapters are careful to distinguish between children’s prosocial behaviour and adult virtue, Christine Swanton does an admirable job of unsettling this distinction with an excellent philosophical discussion of the idea that virtue can be relative to life stage (p. 125). The conclusion? Children can possess “basic virtue”, and some of those virtues are specific to childhood (p. 128).

Developing virtue presupposes that there is such a thing as virtue, and the next three chapters deal with the challenges raised against this assumption by “situationism”. Having this enemy in common produces a significant amount of overlap between them, but each essay contributes something unique to the debate. Nancy Snow discusses “habits of the

folk”, or how people can become virtuous without explicitly aiming for virtue (p. 137), and although her introduction to “the way of the *Junzi*” (p. 149) provides some much-needed cultural diversity, it is unclear whether a Confucian focus on external proprieties and rituals is still a viable way of cultivating virtuous people or simply a means to recreate Victorian England. Rachana Kamtekar also deals with the role of structures in stabilising virtuous dispositions (p. 185), and argues that different dispositions should be stabilised by different means (pp. 197–98). Habits and structures might both be essential, but will only foster true virtue if people are also made to reflect on their behaviour. Information, therefore, is key, and Christian B. Miller thinks we can manage the negative impact on behaviour of the “surprising dispositions” uncovered in situationist research by disseminating such information (pp. 170–71). The “extremely pressing” question is how we are to get people interested in improving themselves (p. 173).

The fact that motivation plays a role not only in the acquisition but also in the exercise of virtue is the background to Matt B. Stichter’s contribution. If situationism is the common enemy, the “skill model” of virtue is the rampart on which the authors of this volume mount their defence. That fortification is, however, vulnerable to the objection that one can be skilled at something without necessarily being motivated to do one’s best. Virtue, by contrast, requires the right motivation. Stichter hopes to block this objection by distinguishing between skilled performance and skilled performer, with the latter honorary only given to those who are properly motivated (pp. 207–08). What remains is practical wisdom, but that, thinks Stichter, is a different difference (pp. 215–19). Julia Annas, for her part, tackles the (alleged) problem of “thick concepts” by arguing against all attempts at isolating purely descriptive aspects of virtue terms (pp. 224–33).

After all the talk of skills and dispositions, the three final chapters provide refreshingly different takes on the theme of virtue development – even if they are not equally successful. Jennifer A. Herdt argues persuasively for the importance of a capacity for guilt in the person aspiring to virtue (pp. 235–48), but her partial rehabilitation of shame as a sometimes appropriate negative evaluation of “the global self” (pp. 249–51) is too dependent on Christian doctrine to be quite convincing.

Gustavo Carlo & Alexandra N. Davies make the case that emotions are important predictors for prosocial behaviour, and, inspired by Hume, argue on the basis of this that benevolence should get a bigger role to play in western societies obsessed with justice (pp. 255–67). I agree with their implied criticism of the narrowing of morality to justice, but their counterintuitive conclusion that “[w]hat is deemed just and fair is prone to the subjective perspectives of observers and protagonists, whereas benevolence ... presents a relatively clear barometer on right and wrong” needs to be much better substantiated if it is to be convincing to the very influential school of thought that holds the exact opposite view. I am also unsure whether benevolence is the right candidate to challenge incumbent justice, and would like to cast my vote in favour of that other Scottish Enlightenment stalwart “sympathy”. Hume’s friend Adam Smith, who explicitly discusses and rejects benevolence in favour of sympathy, would be a good source to draw on (2002, VII.ii.3.15–16, pp. 358–59).

Smith would also be relevant to Mark LeBar, who takes Friedrich Hayek’s theory about the emergence of spontaneous order and marries it with a model of how norms of justice develop from taking another’s perspective. The result is a convincing story about how systems of norms can arise from processes which are partly conscious and reflective, and partly non-conscious and evolutionary. LeBar’s limited focus on justice could be expanded to include other virtues by drawing on Smith, who already influences LeBar indirectly by way

of Hayek. LeBar's proposal for a research program for developmental psychology (p. 288) thus provides a nicely open-ended finish to this diverse and mostly successfully cross-disciplinary volume of discussions of the development of virtue.

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