
From dependence to recognitionThomas Baldwin¹

As Plato and Aristotle taught, moral education is primarily a matter of developing and entrenching a good character. I take it that good character has three main elements: sensitivity to the needs, concerns and wishes of others, a willingness to take proper account of these in one's own actions, and a capacity to reflect critically on one's actions. So how is such a character to be developed and entrenched? Following Rawls I distinguish three main stages in this process. The first comes as a young child grows up in a family in which the child experiences the love of its parents. Here the child experiences itself as dependent on parents and in being loved by them, the child experiences itself as worthy of love, and thereby begins to develop a secure sense of its own value. The second stage comes as an older child encounters others with whom s/he needs to cooperate in more or less friendly ways in order to obtain what is wanted. In this context the child experiences itself as dependent on others who are equally dependent on it, and comes to understand the importance of trust, responsibility and fairness in dealings with others. The third stage comes when this older child grows into adulthood and comes to recognise others, irrespective of any immediate relations of mutual dependence, as worthy of respect in virtue of their capacity to bring value to their lives and to recognise this capacity in others. Alongside this account of moral development there needs to be an account of the values and moral standards which shape the life of a person with a good character and I shall discuss how far it is appropriate to think of these values as 'natural' or 'non-natural'.

¹University of York, UK