Tuba Işık

Cultivating Character

Virtue Ethics and the Islamic Educational Tradition

VERLAG KARL ALBER

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Introduction

We live in a time and in a world that demands a great deal from people due to their complexity. A multi-religious and multi-cultural society presents everyone with different challenges in terms of their ability to understand and act. Other ways of life and culturally foreign traditions relativise certainties, trigger feelings of alienation and call one's own identity into question. Although these phenomena are well known, in highly complex, pluralistic societies, they take on the form of a "new complexity" (Habermas). Modern society has lost the guiding role models from earlier eras and is—like the subjects within it—left to its own devices.

The ways in which people live together are also undergoing profound social and cultural change in Germany.[1] This change plays a major role in the growth, development, and education of children and young people. They are faced with the problem of becoming capable of judgement and action in increasingly complicated circumstances and having to find their bearings. In the face of new, unknown situations, children and young people are challenged in their personal abilities, characteristics, and attitudes, i.e., in all aspects that guide their actions, their character, or personality.[2] Against this background, it is all the more relevant to think about educational goals. By updating virtue ethics for educational practices, I would like to propose a counterbalance to an increasing loss of meaning and lack of orientation, both of which affect young people in two ways: the experience and affects of living in a fragmented society and on their path to adulthood and identity formation. The cultivation of the self from the perspective of virtue ethics can be described as the never-ending process of self-discovery, which is orientated

1 Cf. Ingrid Gogolin and Marianne Krüger-Potratz, *Einführung in die interkulturelle Pädagogik*, 3rd edition (Leverkusen, 2020), 15.

2 The concept of character will be explicated later and related to the concept of the self. At this point, it can at least be said that the terms *personality* and *character* are used synonymously.

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around the three questions: *Who am I?*, *Who should I be?*, and *Who do I want to be?* The educational task could then be to encourage young people to find a balance between these basic questions. In the question, *Who should I be?*, lies the social reference of the self; in the question, *Who do I want to be?*, lies the reference to the private part of the self, which is only accessible to the individual, i.e., their self-realisation. In this holistic view, the young person is not left to their own devices; guided by pedagogy and virtue ethics, they can develop a stable, mature, and autonomous character, which virtue ethics summarises under the concept of the good life.

Although there are virtues that claim universal validity, they differ in their cultural and situational interpretation and form. The ethical virtue work on the self is therefore always linked to cultural and life-world knowledge as well as interpersonal actions, whether at school, on the bus, or when shopping. Thus, working on oneself always means confronting one's self and engaging with others and their values, norms, feelings, etc. Against this backdrop, cultivating the self as an educational goal aims to educate young people to become mature individuals capable of judgement and self-determination.

Wilhelm von Humboldt's theory of education provides a guiding template for the concept of cultivating the self. For Humboldt, the highest ideal is "to educate oneself within oneself"; it is "that in which everyone develops only out of himself and for his own sake."[3] He understands education as self-cultivation and as an ongoing process. Humboldt's concept of education, which is concretised in the first chapter, is aimed at personal human development, which forms a lifelong learning and educational process of reciprocal engagement with one's own talents and potentials as well as with the world. Humboldt's concept of education is of key importance for the current conception of education. In concrete terms, self-cultivation is associated with the following central questions: *how do I want to be?* and *how do I want to live with others?* The present work deals with these questions from an ethical virtue perspective, which can stimulate current educational thinking, especially Islamic religious education. The research focus of this book is therefore on the moral constitution of human beings and their ability to develop and be educated. The formation of a stable and mature character and the

3 Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Gesammelte Werke*, (Berlin, 1841) vol. I, 56, 109.

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ability to relate to others are, therefore, simultaneous and equally important educational goals.

The work begins in the *first chapter* with an overview of the topicality of virtue ethics discourses, focusing on the key concepts of personal development, competence, value, and recognition on the one hand, and the concept of "work on the self" on the other. The main focus of this book is virtue as a dimension of education, as the analytical debates on virtue and virtue ethics are only of limited use for real life.

The cultivation of the self is a process that starts very early in terms of developmental psychology, and the arguments presented here contain the normative implication that it should also be given space in the school context, which is already happening to some extent. At the very least, school mandates of most federal states in Germany require this self-cultivation, as will be explained in the first chapter. There are important pedagogical concepts and approaches that ask how children and young people can be equipped to rethink familiar views and perspectives and develop important competencies.[4] From these, I will select some widely received concepts and use them as examples to discuss the ethical-pedagogical development of the self, and the meaning of virtue as a character disposition and its suitability as an educational process taught in schools. This investigation shows that hardly any pedagogical approach looks at the ethical formation of children and young people from a theoretical virtue perspective. Understanding virtue ethics as a question about the conditions, possibilities, and goals of character formation first of all requires leaving behind pedagogical baggage associated with the National Socialist era, and redefining the discourses in the face of a rapidly changing and digitising world. In the present work, this includes a recourse to examples from Islamic educational thinking and the philosophical virtue thinking of Muslim philosophers, with the aim of rethinking and redefining the concept of virtue.

The guiding thematic horizon, "cultivation of the self," also forms the focus of the *second chapter.* In the second chapter, we devote ourselves entirely to the concept of virtue, which refers to a successful approach to practical life issues. The starting point is Aristotle's

4 Cf. Ludwig Duncker, *Wege zur ästhetischen Bildung. Anthropologische Grundlegungen und schulpädagogische Orientierungen* (Munich, 2018), 144.

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theory of virtue in *Nicomachean Ethics*, which deals extensively with the cultivation of character through virtues. But how can we understand virtue today? As antiquated as the concept of virtue may seem, it is enjoying a modest revival and has now regained importance in modern ethical discussions, including secular educational and religious pedagogical discourses.[5] Based on this consideration, virtue should be defined as an ethical source for a good life for the individual as well as for the community. Orientation towards the concept of virtue can help to cultivate practical and action-guiding habits that provide people a sense of direction and make life easier. Virtue basically describes what is inherent in people as a possibility, but needs formation and practice in order for it to unfold. I do not want this book to be understood as a revival of an outdated and repressive understanding of virtue that is associated with obsolete mandatory duties (*Pflichtkataloge*) or "training terror" (*Dressurterror*).[6] With this in mind, it is important to discuss the topicality and necessity of contemporary virtue ethics formation and to introduce it into educational theory discourse. Therefore, a solid and systematic foundation of the current concept of virtue is to be developed at the end of the second chapter with recourse to virtue ethics discourse.

Following this overview of the moral theoretical, pedagogical, and cultural aspects of a reconsideration of the concept of virtue, the extensive *third chapter* examines traditions of Islamic intellectual and educational history for their affinity to or location in the field of virtue ethics.

Personal development has always been part of Islamic educational, philosophical, and mystical thought. Although, of course, not

5 Cf. Dagmar Borchers, *Die neue Tugendethik - Schritt zurück im Zorn. Eine Kontroverse in der Analytischen Philosophie* (Paderborn, 2001), 12; see also Hans-Ullrich Dallmann, "Eine tugendethische Annäherung an Begriff und Pädagogik der Kompetenzen," *Ethik und gesellschaft: Bildung, Gerechtigkeit und Kompetenz* 1 (2009): 1–50. See also Tuba Isik, "Kultivierung des Charakters als Selbstverständnis des Islamischen Religionsunterrichts," in *Islamunterricht im Diskurs. Religionspädagogische und fachdidaktische Ansätze*, eds. Tarek Badawia and Said Topalovic (Göttingen, 2022).

6 Cf. Walter Eykmann and Sabine Seichter (eds.), *Pädagogische Tugenden* (Würzburg, 2007), 7ff. On the term "training terror" (*Dressurterror*), see Timo Hoyer, *Tugend und Erziehung. Die Grundlegung der Moralpädagogik in der Antike* (Bad Heilbrunn, 2005).

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named as such, the idea of self-cultivation of the human being with the intention of coming closer to God is evident in the various strands of tradition. Islamic conceptions of self-cultivation harbour two crucial terms that will be explored in more detail below: *akhlāq* (character traits) and *nafs* (soul, self). At this point, however, I would like to define the term *self*, as there are also different meanings and uses of this term in the Islamic tradition.[7] I define the term *self* as the totality of processed knowledge about oneself. A self-image implies all perceived attributes and views of a person that are explicitly and implicitly constructed by that person, such as character traits and ideas about their own emotional experience. I add the term *character* as well as the modern term *personality* to these self-related constructs.

Not only the *concept of akhlāq*, but also the *concept of adab* (manners, etiquette) plays a key role in this book context, which is why the chapter begins with a basic definition of the concept of *adab* and then moves on to the literary genre of *makārim al-akhlāq (noblest character traits)* using the example from the educated man of letters and scholar *Abī 'l-Dunyā* (823–894).[8] The interesting thing about Abī 'l-Dunyā is that, without using the concept of virtue, he sets out in prose his ideas of desirable character traits such as reliability,

7 For more on this, see Renate Daniel, *Das Selbst. Grundlagen und Implikationen eines zentralen Konzepts der Analytischen Psychologie* (Stuttgart, 2018). See also Ann-Kathrin Banser and Philipp Bode, *Selbstwerden: über das Selbst als Aufgabe und die Möglichkeiten seiner Realisierung bei Søren Kierkegaard* (Würzburg, 2018); Tuba Isik, "Das Selbstwertgefühl türkischer Migrantenkinder in Deutschland. Ein empirischer Vergleich von türkischstämmigen Grundschulkindern in Deutschland und türkischen Grundschulkindern in der Türkei," (Göttingen, 2006), 21 (online resource in the Lower Saxony State and University Library: https://d-nb.info/1044178914/34).

8 The term *makārim al-akhlāq* (noblest character traits) refers in the Islamic tradition to the highest moral virtues that are meant to shape a person's ethical conduct. It goes back to prophetic traditions in which the Qur'ān describes the Prophet Muḥammad's mission as the completion of "beautiful character traits" (*ḥusn al-akhlāq*). In the literature, one finds various translations: *makārim* is sometimes rendered as "the noblest," "the highest," or "the most excellent," while *akhlāq* is translated as "character traits," "virtues," "manners," or "morality." Thus, the range of interpretations extends from "noblest virtues" to "excellent manners" and "perfect morality." This semantic breadth highlights that the expression refers not only to ethical norms but also to a comprehensive moral excellence and perfection of character.

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generosity, neighbourliness, and friendship on the basis of prophetic and post-prophetic traditions.

Following this, carefully selected individual Muslim philosophers who have embraced Aristotelian virtue ethics are analysed to determine what insights they may presently provide for reflecting on virtue. Like many other religious traditions, Islamic philosophy harbours its own ideas about how personal qualities and basic dispositions can be cultivated. Muslim philosophers discussed this cultivation in a separate genre that gradually emerged, the *tahdhīb al-akhlāq (refinement of character traits)*.[9] I would like to take up this discourse, which places the condition of the character of human beings at the centre of philosophical observation. *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq* developed its own epistemology for this and developed into a discipline called *ʿilm al-akhlāq* (knowledge of character traits). It would be an overly ambitious goal and intention to present a comprehensive historical and geographical overview of the individual dialectical pollinations of virtue ethics thinking. My aim is therefore to comprehensibly trace the basic features using a few Muslim philosophers as examples, in order to show which understanding of virtue prevailed and which catalogues of virtues emerged. The link between ethics and aesthetics also provides insights, as aesthetics was one of the central learning areas of religiously based self-cultivation processes, which included literature, art, and music education in particular.[10] We will come across these ideas when clarifying the concept of *adab* and among Muslim mystics. The Muslim mystics primarily referred to this process of cultivating the self as *tazkiyya an-nafs*. Insights from Islamic mysticism *(taṣawwuf*) or Sufism should then show that not only philosophically guided mental (and sometimes practical) exercises but also concrete practical exercises make an important contribution to the investigation here.

Against this background, I would like to draw attention to the emancipatory and creative potential of the Islamic tradition of

9 In Islamic scholarship, the expression *tahdhīb al-akhlāq* ("refinement of character traits" or "disciplining of morals") denotes the conscious cultivation and purification of human character. Unlike *makārim al-akhlāq*, which refers to the noblest virtues, *tahdhīb* emphasises the process of moral education and training towards virtue.

10 See Nurcan Özbal and İsmail Aydoğan, "Eğitimde Estetiğin gerekliliği ve oluşumu üzerine bir inceleme," *DergiPark Akademik* 7.2 (2017): 249–260, 253.

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thought, above all to reveal its inherent potential to serve the common good and emphasise it as a source of inspiration for contemporary educational theory.

The concluding chapter formulates a synthesis of the observations made, in which the impressions gained in the course of reflecting on philosophical and pedagogical discourses on the one hand, and Islamic philosophical and mystical discourses on the other hand, are brought together and placed within the horizon of far-reaching moral concepts. These concepts can be understood as central virtues; the concept of justice, which refers back to the origins of virtue ethics, is centrally placed alongside the concepts of sincerity, compassion, and friendship. The book concludes with some pedagogical insights for Islamic religious education.

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Table of Contents

Chapter I: Educational Theory Approaches in Revision 17

1. In Search of the Cultivation of the Self 17
2. Work on the Self with Ethical Virtues: A Component of the Educational Mission of Schools 26
3. Consideration of Existing Concepts for Personality Development 34
   - 3.1 Approaches to Values Education 35
   - 3.2 Ethical Formation 41
   - 3.3 Recognition Pedagogy 43
   - 3.4 Intercultural Pedagogy 47
   - 3.5 *Virtue Competence*? The Consequences of Virtue Ethics: Considerations for the Discourse on Competencies in Educational Theory 51
   - 3.6 Summary 54

Chapter II: Theories on the Cultivation of the Self 57

1. A Modern Concept of Virtue: Preliminary Clarification in the Midst of Virtue Ethics Discourses 57
   - 1.1 Philosophical Revival of Aristotelian Virtue Ethics in the Present Day 59
   - 1.2 Virtue: An Ambivalent Word in Germany 64
2. Virtue Ethics as a Reference Point for a Common Life . . . 69
3. Educating the Whole Person: Reviving Virtues Based on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics 74
   - 3.1 Character Virtues: Exploring the Best in Character . . 79
     A Brief Excursus: Aristotle's Concept of the Soul . . . 80
   - 3.2 The Deliberation Process as a Condition of Self-knowledge 82

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783495991527-1 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

3.3 Prospering for a Successful Life 83
3.4 Emotions as Relevant Dispositions of Moral Excellence 86
3.5 The Cultivation of Character 91

Chapter III: The Cultivation of the Self in the Islamic Intellectual History of Educational Understanding in the 9th–12th Centuries 95

1. Adab and akhlāq: Two Categories of Ethical Educational Endeavours 95
2. Adab and Its Multiple Meanings 99
   2.1 Types of Adab Literature 103
   2.2 Ibn Abī 'l-Dunyā (823–894) 111
   2.3 Kitāb Makārim al-Akhlāq 113
   2.4 Narrative Constructions of a Vision of the Virtuous . 117
   2.5 The Significance of Ethical, Religious *Adab* Literature for Contemporary Educational Thinking 122
3. Ethical Education in the Ethical Virtue Tradition of Thought 126
   3.1 *Akhlāq* as a Connotative Concept of the Islamic Ethnoleader 128
   3.2 Phase of the Translation of Ancient Philosophical Writings 132
   3.3 Virtue Ethics Tradition 137
      3.3.1 Abū Naṣr Muḥammad al-Fārābī (c. 872–950) 139
      3.3.2 Abū ʿAlī Miskawayh (932–1030) 141
      3.3.3 Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 1108) 151
      3.3.4 Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (c. 1055–1111) 154
      3.3.5 Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (1201–1274) 164
   3.4 Brief Summary 167
4 Ethical Thinking in Islamic Mysticism: A Brief Outline . . 170
   4.1 Tazkiyya al-nafs: Physical Practices as Ethical Virtue Practice 179
   4.2 A Brief Outlook 185
5. Summarising Reflections on the Cultivation of the Self . . 186

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783495991527-1 https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

Chapter IV: Contribution of Ethical Virtue Conceptions to the Modern Understanding of Education 193

1. Society, Virtue, and Competence 193
2. Four Possible Virtues 198
   - 2.1 Justice 198
   - 2.2 Sincerity 201
   - Excursus: Respect as an Important Secondary Virtue 204
   - 2.3 Compassion 210
   - 2.4 Friendship 218
3. Reflections on the Educational Discourse within the Horizon of Virtue Ethics 221
4. Insights for a Contemporary Islamic Religious Education in Germany 227

Abbreviations 231

Sources 233

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