Reading Task : Aristotle vs Rousseau


Reading Guide

Sommers’ work is broadly aligned with a movement known as ‘Character’ or ‘Emotions’ Education. It is perhaps stretching things to call it a movement, as this designation can take in a range of researchers from different disciplines who often do not agree with each other (see Kristjansson 2002 for further discussion). However, I think a broad ‘family resemblance’ can be identified, and advocates of the movement (which is overall an approach to how moral education should be conducted, in schools and other contexts) tend to share a commitment to the following themes or ideas:

(i) A return to ‘lost’ insights drawn from the philosophy of Aristotle. Rather than simply consisting of conceptual clarification (being clear about what you believe) or cognitive approaches (helping students to reason out what is right and wrong), moral development should concern itself with the education of the emotions and the building of character. Moral development has cognitive (you need to know or be able to work out what is right or wrong), affective (you need to have certain emotional reactions to what is right or wrong, i.e. you should be repulsed by what is morally wrong), conative (you need to want to do what is right, rather than just know what is right) and behavioural (the virtuous agent not only knows what is right, but does it too) elements.

A key aspect of this approach is that education should concern itself, at least in the early years, primarily with a process of habituation: our emotional responses to actions or events are formed at our mother’s knee, often before we know what is right or wrong or can support our feelings with reasoned judgements or evidence. Habituation can occur through direct instruction (telling children what is right or wrong), the cultivation of a moral ethos in an educational institution (the hidden or indirect messages we give about how one ought to live), behavioural conditioning (i.e. through rewards and sanctions), role modelling (offering students the right exemplars to imitate) and the use of moral stories.

(ii) A general agreement that the work of an education in morality should be informed by the findings of moral psychology. Aristotle claimed that his philosophy should be guided by the findings of empirical science.

(iii) A critique of the philosophy of Rousseau, who is held responsible for ‘progressive’ developments in education whereby we became wary of instructing students directly in the moral wisdom of the ages (for a sympathetic view, see Gove 2013).

Questions:
You do not have to address all of these questions in your forum contribution, but these indicate some possible lines of enquiry that you might pursue.

(i) To what extent do you agree with the view, attributed to Arendt, that ‘every year civilisation is invaded by the millions of tiny barbarians’ (p. 23). You might want to link your answer to the discussion of the Christian doctrine of ‘original sin’ later in the chapter, around p. 27ff.

(ii) Explore the example that Sommers offers of a ‘fashionable’ ethical pedagogy (you might also want to look at Sommers 1993), as well as the sub-section on ‘value-free kids’. What justifications can be offered for the approach that Sommers criticises?

(iii) You might want to connect Sommers’ evaluation with what you already know about Rousseau, or perhaps even read some Rousseau (I recommend dipping into Chapter Two of the Emile). Does Sommers read him right? N.B. a number of critics, even quite eminent ones, tend to conflate Rousseau’s views with generic ideas they have picked up about ‘Romanticism’. I think this is a mistake – avoid it.

(iv) Something complex and subtle is at work here around concepts like autonomy, freedom, and indoctrination. Can you summarise Sommers’ argument clearly? What is your evaluation of it?

Further Reading:

**On character education:**
I have uploaded this paper to the Reading Task One partition of the assessment folder on the Moodle page.

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**For Sommers’ perspective and background:**
I have uploaded this paper to the Reading Task One partition of the assessment folder on the Moodle page.

**For a perspective on Rousseau that is closer to home:**

**For Rousseau’s perspective on reading, from the horse’s mouth, as it were:**
Rousseau, J-J (original publication 1762) Emile, or On Education
There are a number of different translations of this which are all fine for our current purposes. The full text is also available for kindle or pdf download on the project Gutenberg website:
http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/5427