

# Transforming Character

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### Overview

A simplistic political dichotomy places concern with character on the political right. In popular culture virtue talk is almost exclusively the preserve of conservatives and at its worst it is little more than victim blaming.

However not having access to virtue language prevents those of us on the progressive side of politics from properly articulating the moral and spiritual harm that poverty, inequality and oppression does to both victims and perpetrators.

We need therefore to recover Aristotle's insight that it is pointless to discuss character in isolation for the types of polity in which character is formed and sustained.

### Second Nature

The Renaissance of Virtue Ethics from the 1980s onwards is now well known.

Much of that work has been self consciously 'naturalistic' but it is a very peculiar form of naturalism.

Philosophers like Philippa Foot and John McDowell have emphasised the importance to ethical thought of the fact that character is a developmental concept

We acquire it, or fail to acquire it, in the context of becoming initiated into a linguistic community.



## Annette Baier A Naturalist View of Persons

To be a naturalist is to remember that “Persons are born to earlier persons, and learn the arts of personhood from other persons”.

A view which she contrasts with the Kantian orthodoxy that

“To be a person is not to be born of woman, nor indeed to be born at all, but to spring forth from some fertile noumenal field of Ares fully formed and upright”.

Annette Baier (1991) 'A Naturalist View of Persons' *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* November 1991, 5-17

## A proper upbringing

In *Natural Goodness* (2003) Philippa Foot places great store on the concept of a “proper upbringing”

A well brought up person comes to recognise the demands of virtue in the same way that someone with properly functioning vision sees colour.

For that reason there is no need to press ethics into providing a compelling argument for the moral sceptic or sociopath.

However, as it stands the concept is so vague as to be question begging.

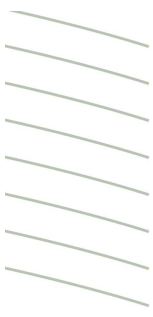
## A South African Predicament

Several years ago a white South African woman in one of my lectures asked me how I would brought up children under apartheid teach them to resist and expose them to profound danger or to turn a blind eye and do well in conventional terms.

A couple of years this predicament became real for me when I went to work there.

Although the formal structures of apartheid have been dismantled, RSA remains an obscenely unjust society.

What do I do as a white academic living there, even temporarily?



## Between Indifference and Anguish

Attentiveness is a “burdened” epistemic virtue in Lisa Tessman’s (2005) sense

As a white academic I could have turned a blind eye (as many Australian academics do to the suffering of our indigenous citizens and of refugees) written my book and enjoyed a very comfortable life.

Or I could have thrown myself into largely futile political activism.

In addition to the danger of burnout there is the added danger of White Saviour Complex.

Moral failure beckons in every direction.

## Virtue Politics

I have no satisfactory solution.

But what it showed me in a very real sense is how virtue thinking can provide a powerful intellectual resource for the criticism of unjust social conditions.

The injustice of South Africa is to a large extent bound up with the ways in which it leads to inevitable moral failure.

We can think about the ways in which the refugee issue and indigenous questions and the looming environmental catastrophe also make moral failure inevitable.



## Concluding thoughts

Character is not an all or nothing thing, formed in early childhood.

It is a lifelong endeavour. It can be unformed or destroyed e.g. through torture or abuse.

We all have stewardship over the characters of others especially though not exclusively of the young.

More importantly, much character formation is institutional and we must therefore have just and well functioning institutions.

“The Personal is the Political”

## Bibliography

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