

Educating Desire and Virtue: Alasdair MacIntyre, Narrative Formation, and the Limits of Contemporary Character Education

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Abstract

Contemporary educational discourse increasingly emphasizes character education as a response to perceived moral and civic deficits among students. Yet despite widespread adoption, such initiatives frequently struggle with conceptual coherence, implementation, and assessment. Drawing on Alasdair MacIntyre's moral philosophy—particularly his culminating work *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*—this paper argues that these difficulties stem from a deeper philosophical problem: contemporary character education is typically grounded in an expressivist moral framework that lacks an intelligible account of desire, virtue, and moral formation. MacIntyre's critique of modern moral culture highlights how moral language, when detached from shared practices and narrative traditions, devolves into expressions of preference or managerial technique. In contrast, MacIntyre understands education as the formation of desire through participation in socially embodied practices oriented toward internal goods and sustained within tradition-constituted communities. Using the International Baccalaureate's Learner Profile and Approaches to Learning as a representative case, this paper illustrates how even philosophically ambitious character education frameworks risk incoherence when virtues are abstracted from the practices that give them meaning. The paper concludes by proposing a MacIntyrean reorientation of character education grounded in narrative unity, practice-based virtue formation, and the education of desire as a philosophically robust alternative to expressivist models of moral education.

Keywords: Alasdair MacIntyre; character education; curriculum theory; moral formation; virtue ethics