



## Becoming Friends: Philosophical Insights into Moral and Spiritual Development

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The latter part of the 20th century has seen the rise of concern with many of the characteristic features of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment promised a brave new world in which human reason, science, and their fruits would provide the basis of human progress. The First World War confirmed its failure in the most tragic manner. After the Second World War through to the present day we see increasing concern with the inadequacy of technical rationality and the managerialism it supports, and its inability to articulate a consistent ethic. The account of moral and spiritual development I will present is set against the failure of the enlightenment project to deliver a better world and draws on the attempts of philosophers of the 20th Century to offer an alternative approach. I wish to suggest that a virtue based approach to ethics can help us to understand the role of Scouting in moral development, and that Martin Buber's account of dialogue and encounter can help us to understand the role of Scouting in spiritual development.

At the heart of this alternative is the recognition of the centrality of practical wisdom and of the other virtues in our account of human action. As Gilbert Ryle and Michael Polanyi argue practical knowledge precedes and provides the basis for theoretical knowledge. Virtuous action, deeds and qualities which are praised, provide the basis for moral norms. To be good is not to be reckoned primarily in terms of whether certain rules are kept or not but in terms of whether we are virtuous people, something to which our preferences provide a guide. Rules are useful because they set out clear criteria. They are less useful because the complexity of human living means that practical judgement (which is itself not a rule) is required to see how and whether a given rule applies in this way in this situation.

## Aristotle

Baden-Powell's account of happiness bears a passing similarity to Aristotle's ethics, which begins by observing that all desire eudaimonia (1095a18) – usually translated as happiness, but better as flourishing. Happiness is a state of action, the “feeling good” which supervenes on excellent conduct. Perhaps something akin to the satisfaction we sometimes experience in both work and sport. The satisfaction of having done a little bit to make the world a better place.

Aristotle sets out his ethics in terms of what it is to be a good human being. There are certain excellences that we look for and praise in people, and these are the virtues. Rare and hard won qualities such as bravery, temperance, generosity, magnificence, magnanimity, mildness, friendliness, wit, shame, and justice. They enable us to do the right thing, at the right time, in the right way, (1106b17-24) in the manner in which virtuous people do them (1105a22-b9).

Plato was among the first to ask whether virtue can be taught or whether it is rather the product of practice or nature. Aristotle answers that virtue comes from habit, not from nature. For habituation, repeated action cannot change what is natural. “A stone, for instance, by nature, moves downwards, and habituation could not make it move upwards, not even if you threw it up ten thousand times to habituate it.” (1103a21-23)

He draws an analogy with the way in which we learn a craft: “by producing the same product that we must produce when we have learned it; we become builders by building, harpists by playing the harp. Similarly then, we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions.” (1103a33-b2) Aristotle is well aware that practice makes permanent, not perfect, for he notes that “playing the harp makes both good and bad harpists”, and “building makes good and bad builders.” (1103b9-12) And hence the need for teachers. When I started to play classical guitar, I would focus on trying to play the right notes. It needed my teacher to point out that the rhythm was at least as important as pitch. In learning to speak Italian, my friends had to point out to me the significant difference of pronunciation between “casinò” and “casino” for English does not discriminate between these sounds.

Though Aristotle clearly asserts that “a state of character arises from the repetition of similar activities” (1103b22) it would be wrong to understand this as happening without rational reflection, for this state of character decides deliberately.

He offers some practical advice to his readers. To aim at the intermediary we need to steer clear of the contrary extreme. (1109a31) “We must drag ourselves off in the contrary direction; for if we pull far away from error, as they do in straightening bent wood, we shall reach the intermediate condition.” (1109b6) The need to compensate is made all the more necessary by our tendency to be biased by the pleasures which come from our present state, and the displeasure that may come from something new. (1109b8)

Experience and an assessment of the situation are required in action, for virtue demands not only that we act in a certain way, but more particularly that we do so at certain times, and not at others. Indeed the capacity to judge rightly is an indicator of the possession of a particular virtue. To never flee because of fear is not brave, but rash. To always do so is cowardly. The role of the teacher is to ensure that the situation is correctly understood and that the right action follows: this is the time to be brave, this is the time to flee. In doing so the teacher draws on their own virtue and practical wisdom. The teacher will communicate this through comment on specific instances and the telling of stories that embody and express these values. Richard Sorabji usefully suggests that Aristotle's emphasis on habituation is to stress its centrality (probably against Platonising tendencies) rather than to exclude other factors. We see, for example, in the Politics that Aristotle is quite aware of the role of habit, teaching

and nature in the formation of the virtues. (1332a40-b11, 1334b6-25, 1338b4-8) By nature, some are more adaptable than others.

Teaching, such as the Nicomachean Ethics itself, will work for some, but only those already possessed of some habituation and experience. Arguments can encourage “the civilised ones among the young people” and those of a “well-born character that truly loves what is fine”, but cannot “turn the many towards being fine and good.” (1179b5-10)

To live a life of virtue is to properly order action and pleasure. The many, the most vulgar, typically order their actions in pursuit of pleasure (1094b18). The cultivated, and those active in politics typically order their actions in pursuit of honour. (1094b23). For the virtuous, pleasure and honour supervene upon their actions. (1099a14) Education into the life of virtue consists first then in cultivation and habitation into acting in the right manner, assisted by laws which reward good action and punish wicked action (Book IX). For good habits precede our ability to grasp that something is right and good. We come to see what is noble by being habituated to noble and just actions: we come to understand what good food is by tasting a variety of good foods. “We learn that something is enjoyable by trying it and coming to find it so.” Indeed, as Burnyeat puts it “Growth of enjoyment goes hand in hand with the internalisation of knowledge.” “Such that pleasure or pain on the act becomes the sign of state of character.”

### **Mac Intyre**

In the latter part of *Dependent Rational Animals*, Mac Intyre considers the manner in which people “become independent practical reasoners.” This independence, or autonomy is a prerequisite for moral action. We must establish sufficient affective and cognitive distance from our reasons to enable us to identify and evaluate them. We must therefore become detached from our present desires and move from actions which please ourselves, our parents and others, to actions which are intrinsically good.

Once we have established some distance, we are then able to properly internalise our motivation. The possession of the virtues enable us to do this. For example, temperance becomes not moderation in spite of desire, but the habitual desire of moderation.

An important component in the evaluation of our reasons is the “Capacity to imagine alternative realistic futures” and the possible consequence of particular courses of action. We see in this an important parallel with the model Gerald Egan presents in *The Skilled Helper*. To help people move on when they are stuck, it is important to enable them to envisage how things might be other than they are now. Along with this, in due time comes also the ability to make the right judgement about practical matters.

From this analysis Mac Intyre enables us to identify the sort of mentoring role that we require of others for our moral growth.

Initially we depend on those who teach us skills and the recognition of the goods of various practices. Later we continue to need others to protect against moral and intellectual error: “From both types of mistake the best protections are friendship and collegiality.” Our judgements become validated as they withstand their objections.

We become and remain independent practical reasoners through relationships, and their affective and cognitive aspects. We need relationships to enable us to critique (“evaluate, modify or reject”) our own practical judgements. We become independent through patterns of care: of receiving and giving. In particular, parenting allows the child to test both itself and external reality. The virtues of parents in this include an unconditional commitment in which the needs of the child not theirs are paramount.

So to summarise: social relationships, imagination and play enable us to internalise our motivations and achieve the autonomy required for the exercise of moral virtue. From these same relationships we learn to first exercise and then recognise the dispositions and states which mark us out as excellent human beings.

I have entitled this paper “Becoming Friends”. Friendship for Aristotle is one of the greatest pleasures of human life. Deep friendship, true friendship, comes about as one of the fruits of virtue. Men become friends by doing noble deeds together. For me, this helps to explain the particular friendship I have experienced within Scouting – not as the reason for my participation, but certainly one of its valued fruits.

I would now like to turn my attention to spiritual development and through identifying the nature of spirituality to establish the essential conditions for its development. I would also like to suggest how we might relate spirituality so understood to religion.

### **Martin Buber**

Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher of dialogue and student of Hasidism, sketches out a world in which experience and technical skill are distinguished from encounter and the pure presence of relationship. Spirituality is this capacity for encounter. What he means is perhaps best understood by this example from Daniel:

I walked on the road one dim morning, saw a piece of mica lying there, picked it up, and looked at it for a long time. The day was no longer dim: so much light was caught by the stone. And suddenly, as I looked away, I realised that while looking at it I had known nothing of “object” and “subject”; as I looked, the piece of mica and “I” had been one; as I looked, I had tasted unity. I looked at it again, but unity did not return.

This phenomenon, this aspect of human existing, is for Buber, the key to our being truly human. It is representative of the basic word I-Thou. It represents a contemplative timeless state of union which demands our whole being and out of which two can objects arise, the I and the It. I-Thou is contrasted with the basic word I-It which is characterised by objectivity, partial engagement, experience and use, causality and time. Buber is not simply drawing a distinction between treating others as objects and not as people. He is highlighting two fundamentally different ways of being human.

This state of encounter does not and cannot last. It is replaced by the relative partiality of experience so that it can enter into our memory and be ordered and organised. We cannot live only in a contemplative state for we must pass on that which we know to others and we must order and organise our lives, and for this the original unity must be lost – just as the child must separate from the mother for the self to emerge. He writes:

One cannot live in the pure present: it would consume us if care were not taken that it is overcome quickly and thoroughly. But in pure past one can live; in fact, only there can life be arranged. One only has to fill every moment with experiencing and using, and it ceases to burn.

And in all the seriousness of truth, listen: without It a human being cannot live. But whoever lives only with that is not human.

Drawing on Buber we may say that spirituality is the capacity to say I-Thou, a capacity which is unavoidably threatened by the very nature of human society and culture. It is difficult to actively pursue, but can be strengthened by action undertaken with others. In one of his papers on Education he writes, “To make a thing is man’s mortal pride; but to be conditioned in a common job, with the unconscious humility of being a part, of participation and partaking, is the true food of earthly immortality.” Working together in the Patrol System integral to

the Scout Method, presents precisely the conditions which favour occasions of encounter. The spontaneity of relationships which arise are not only social but, for Buber, genuinely spiritual. Thou-saying is, for Buber, also a truly religious act, for behind each immanent Thou stands the transcendent Thou. The confrontation between the Scout and nature also creates opportunity for encounter. The art of the leader is to permit it to happen, to stand back himself from the human drive to experience and use. Awe and wonder is perhaps more common in the new and unexpected. The art is to stand back enough to allow it to emerge in the common and familiar.

Roger Barralet, in *What's All This About, God?* identifies spirituality as the capacity to enter into true, open friendships: friendship with ourselves, with others, with the world around us or with God. Buber enables us to see precisely how these friendships are truly spiritual.

For in truth there is a cosmos for man only when the universe becomes a home for him with a holy hearth where he sacrifices, and there is eros for him only when beings become for him images of the eternal, and community with them becomes revelation; and there is logos for him only when he addresses the mystery with works and service of the spirit.... All of these are gateways into the presence of the word.

### **Levinas**

Emmanuel Levinas, working along similar lines to Buber, highlights that spirituality is not some special type of consciousness, as is often held in the western tradition. It is rather that which happens when our knowing and understanding are “broken through” or broken open. When we come to realise that the other is beyond my knowing and understanding. “The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics”.

This experience of the other is what underpins ethics – the giving of ourselves. Now this may seem strange. However, Levinas is concerned to give an account of ethical behaviour that is not based on the experience of others as “like me”. Ethics based on similarity might be fine, until we decide that a certain group is not like us and therefore do not demand or require ethical treatment and respect. This is his explanation of what happened in the Shoah and all too real a possibility.

While I do not find Levinas easy to read, I do believe that this approach adds some urgency to Buber's call, not only for spirituality, but also for ethics. If Levinas is right, then it is my encounter with others and the spontaneity of that relationship that is the key, more than any specific propositional knowledge that I may gain as a result of the meeting. This is something which is validated by the experience of Scouts: they speak more readily of the friendships they have made and gained than of things they have learned.

To summarise, then, spirituality can be conceived of in terms of the particular kind of spontaneity that occurs between to beings, and in a privileged way between two human beings. Spiritual development is the capacity to enter into these spontaneous and free relationships which call us from where we are now to an unlimited future.

## Limitations

I have drawn on philosophical approaches which are sympathetic to the Scout Method in the hope that doing so will demonstrate that the issues Scouting is grappling with in its discussion of moral and spiritual development are not new and that there is a language which can be drawn upon to discuss its practice.

However, there are some potential problems to which, even though I cannot respond to them fully, the reader's attention should be drawn.

1. Aristotelian virtue ethics is subject to a charge of moral relativism: that it is weak in discriminating between competing moral truth claims. While this may be a challenge for many professional groups, I do not believe that this concern is a serious problem for Scouting. Mac Intyre proposes, perhaps somewhat optimistically, that differences should be resolved through discussion and dialogue: that is he gives a process for handling difference, more than a guarantee that these will be resolved. It strikes me that this approach is also typical of Scouting.
2. Aristotle is pessimistic about the capacities of young people, and is dominated by a masculine approach to values and relationships. I suspect, however, that the difference between the masculine and feminine is around which virtues should be praised rather more than whether virtues constitute a useful tool of analysis. Indeed, the non-foundational, almost post-modern, approach of the Aristotelian tradition separates it from the structures of rationality and control usually associated with masculine approaches. His pessimism about the young is as much an observation of the way in which distractions so easily come about and indicate rather a need for support than a need to exclude them from civic life.
3. The approach to spirituality outlined takes insufficient account of religion. While neither Buber nor Levinas take their discussions on to their implications for religious belief, I believe that a consideration of religion as the language of spirituality could prove fruitful. Just as thoughts need expression in language if we are to engage with them and communicate them, so spirituality needs expression in a conceptual framework, and religion provides for this. While this might seem initially compelling, it must be remembered that the relationship between thought and language is not complex. While language does express thought, philosophers such as Foucault have drawn attention to the way in which language also forms the thought itself.

## Lessons for Scouting

To conclude then, what are the lessons of this brief overview for Scouting?

It seems that we have given an account which provides prima facie evidence in support of the Scout Method. One which highlights the significance of the relationships between adults and young people and between young people themselves. One which underlines the place of spontaneity and play and the role of nature and encountering others in the development of the human person.

### **Suggested reading for non-specialists**

Jean Vanier, *Made for Happiness*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2001.

(*Le goût de bonheur*. Paris: Presses de la Renaissance, 2000)

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