

Virtue Ethics in Practice: The Greenbrier Academy

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Abstract

Part of the development of ontological or “strong” relationality has been the exploration of its more applied aspects. My focus for this article is a therapeutic boarding school, which L Jay Mitchell and I co-founded in West Virginia. I describe how our intention to base this school exclusively on strong relationality led us to employ Aristotle’s virtue ethics.

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Several of us within the Society of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology have been interested in exploring and developing a truly relational ontology (e.g., Slife, 2004; Richardson, 2004; Westerman, 2004). We believe that Western culture and Western science have been hampered by various abstractionist ontologies, such as materialism, dualism, realism, and idealism, where all things are thought to be the most real and fundamental when they are abstracted from their contexts (Slife & Richardson, 2008). This abstractionist ontology is the reason for laboratory science, where one sterilizes subject matter of its natural context to get at the truth or reality of it. A relational ontology, by contrast, assumes that nothing can be understood fundamentally apart from its context. The motion of my hand, for example, requires not only my hand but also a relatively stationary background. The meaning of a sentence requires not only the sentence but also the context of its surrounding sentences.

Part of the development of ontological or “strong” relationality has been the exploration of its more applied aspects. Ken Gergen (2009), for example, does this marvelously in his new book, *Relational Being*. Although I do not favor his social constructionist brand of relationality, which I describe elsewhere (Slife & Richardson, in press), Gergen does a wonderful job of explaining the wide and varied practical ramifications of relationality. As a practicing clinical psychologist, I have been personally intrigued with the practical implications of a relational ontology for psychotherapy, using it for many years in my practice and supervision (e.g., Slife & Wiggins, 2005). However, my focus for this article is a therapeutic boarding school, which L Jay Mitchell and I co-founded in West Virginia. I want to describe how our intention to base this school exclusively on strong relationality led us to Aristotle’s virtue ethics.

The Greenbrier Academy

The name of this therapeutic boarding school is the Greenbrier Academy, partly because of its proximity to the Greenbrier River.



The Greenbrier Academy is situated on 140 acres of rolling hills in the southern part of West Virginia.



Fifty young women, from the 9th through the 12th grades, live, receive counseling, and attend high school there. It features equine therapy with a large horse barn, falconry, and African-style drumming, to name just a few of the more important recreational activities.



Perhaps most importantly, for our purposes today, the kitchen staff, maintenance crew, mentoring team, counseling department, and teachers of its high school all strive to be thoroughly and strongly relational. Indeed, all the teachers will tell you that a strongly relational philosophy pervades not only their *process*, their relationships with the students, but also the *content* of their courses (e.g., relational math).



What does a thoroughly and strongly relational approach mean in this practical setting?

Foremost, it means that quality relationships, whether interpersonal, intrapersonal, historical, or environmental, are the primary focus. As you might guess, many other therapeutic boarding schools care deeply about such relationships, yet these relationships are invariably viewed as a means to get their students to cooperate with *other* therapeutic factors, such as token economies, cognitive interventions, and insight-oriented therapies. Greenbrier Academy, on the other hand, puts a primary focus on the quality of relationships that these young women have with one another, the staff, and their general context. This focus also requires a singular emphasis on community and culture. Questions like – are there group cliques? Who's being left out? And is the culture good? – are constantly being asked.

One of the first issues to arise as we formulated this sort of relational program was its ethical grounding. In other words, if we were interested in generating quality interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships, we needed an ethical framework to help us discern what this “quality” is. Moreover, if we were interested in facilitating good community, then we needed an ethical framework to help us know what this “good” is. Here, I believe that ontologies

themselves have ethical implications. Frank Richardson and I have explored a few of these implications in a recent publication on strong relationality (Slife & Richardson, 2008). They would include sensitivity to and caring about relationships, as well as facilitating meaningful connections between ourselves and the “others” of our lives. Still, the Greenbrier staff found these implications to be fairly thin and not entirely adequate for building a program in which quality relationships and good community were sought.

What Type of Ethical Framework?

Here, I believe that Blaine Fowers (2005) is correct about the relatively few resources available for ethical frameworks. As he says, there are probably “only two alternatives” (Fowers, 2010a, p. 8): as he puts them, “divine revelation” and a “naturalized ethic” (p. 8)¹. In the case of the first alternative, I should mention in passing that Mitchell and I actually founded a highly successful *theistic* approach to wilderness therapy called the Alldredge Academy. If the reader is interested in this at all, I published an extensive description of its therapy program, along with an intriguing case history, in Scott Richards’ (2004) book on theistic psychotherapies (Slife, Mitchell, & Whoolery, 2004). In the case of the Greenbrier Academy, however, we were interested in a more secular or naturalized ethical framework that would be compatible with our relational philosophy. I realize now, though we did not formalize it this way at the time, that the framework we were looking for needed to meet the following four criteria:

- 1) The ethical framework should not be reductive. Otherwise, its reductive nature would strip away the context and rob the ethic of the possibilities so valued by the relationist.
- 2) The ethic itself would need to put a premium on relationships and help us to know what a quality relationship is. We were interested, in particular, in moving away from a one-sided or self-contained individualism.

- 3) We needed similar guidance about the quality of a good community. We needed not only to discriminate among diverse communities but also to find a way to value the community as an end in itself, rather than a means to individual ends.
- 4) The ethic should not be dualistic in the sense of artificially separating important constitutive elements of the ethic itself. The strong relationist would hold that dependent elements should not be treated as independent.

The Fulfillment of the Criteria

With these four criteria loosely in mind, Mitchell and I realized that virtue ethics, specifically Blaine Fowers' (2005) lucid rendition of this ethic, might be particularly helpful to us. As Fowers so ably describes, Aristotle viewed human flourishing, and thus the flourishing of our young women, as eudaimonia – “lifelong pattern of activity devoted to choiceworthy ends and pursued in accordance with virtue” (Fowers, 2010, p. 9). It was not until we explored what eudaimonia truly entails that we realized how ideal Aristotle’s virtue ethics was for our purposes. Let us consider its meaning in relation to each of our four relational criteria.

Criterion 1. Regarding our first criterion of a nonreductive natural ethic, eudaimonia means identifying what is “characteristically human,” and thus what is natural for us as humans. Engaging in our natural activities, according to Aristotle, allows us to live the most flourishing lives. If we are naturally rational, for instance, a good or flourishing life would require engaging well in rational activities. As Fowers (2010) notes, however, the issue of “natural” does not have to reduce ethics to the mechanistically biological or evolutionary, where morality (the good) is valued only for its survival value. Fowers (this issue) argues, on Aristotle’s behalf, that “It is not so much that nature shaped us to have particular moral inclinations and then fooled us into thinking that this is important in itself and more than just so much compulsory genetic

inheritance. It is that ethics is necessary because humans are the kind of beings that must have a way to understand ourselves and guide our actions.” (p. 17).

Fowers’ (this issue) explanation continues: as humans evolved and formed social groups, we became less dependent on automatic behaviors (the mechanistically biological) and more dependent on modes of life defined within one’s groups (the relational). In other words, the necessity for ethics is not simply a product of our hard-wiring but grows out of our need to interpret and make sense of our relationships with others. Consequently, Aristotle’s virtue ethics differs from other naturalized accounts both because it is nondeterministic—since we are self-interpreters—and because it is firmly rooted in a specifically natural human sociality. Indeed, our very identities are forged in interactions, as Charles Taylor (1989) has so often affirmed. Needless to say, this account met Greenbrier’s first criterion of a secular or natural ethic that is relational rather than reductive.

Criterion 2. Does this naturalized ethic also help us to distinguish *quality* relationships? Aristotle first distinguishes, in this regard, eudaimonia from hedonia. Hedonia is primarily individualistic because it focuses almost exclusively on personal emotional satisfaction, and thus changing individual affective states, such as pleasure and pain. Hedonia also tends to emphasize instrumentalism, where means and ends are separated, with the means viewed as strategies or techniques and the ends considered outcomes or products. For example, one can aim for the outcome of wealth, which many would assume brings emotional pleasure, but this particular goal can be accomplished through all sorts of unrelated means, honorable or dishonorable, from virtuous hard work to the worst forms of deception. Human happiness has long been associated with these notions of individual satisfaction and instrumental actions.

Aristotle, on the other hand, views eudaimonia as a durable mode of being in which meaningful goals are pursued, not because they bring about individual hedonia, but because they are worthwhile goods in themselves. These goods are what Fowers calls *constitutive goods*, because their means and ends are not separable; the activities that are needed to get to the end *constitute* the end. Perhaps the best example of such a constitutive good for Aristotle is that of friendship, because the only way to attain friendship is to engage in friendship itself. Aristotle, of course, recognized that some friendships can be hedonic and instrumental, with mutual pleasure or mutual advantage as an instrumental goal. However, he reserved mutual commitment as the highest form of friendship, because it involved a shared vision of worthwhile aims that are pursued together, with each member helping the other to achieve noble actions.

In terms of our second criterion of distinguishing quality relationships, Aristotle is extremely helpful. Quality relationships concern those virtues and goods that are: 1) worthwhile in themselves, even if we incur pain to get them; 2) constitutive, because they do not separate means from ends, and 3) shared, in that they are best pursued with and for the sake of others.

Criterion 3. Greenbrier's concerns about the community are already addressed to some degree through the first two criteria. Because our identities and ethics are unavoidably relational, criterion 1, our communities are pivotal. Because our highest purposes are not individual, but are constitutive and communal, criterion 2, our communities themselves need to be carefully nurtured. Still, to properly facilitate this nurturing, we first need to dispel a prominent myth of hedonic and reductive individualism: the myth that community is merely an instrumental strategy for increasing our chances of *individual* survival. As Aristotle put it so beautifully, “a state [or community] exists for the sake of a good life, and not for the sake of life only”

(Aristotle, 1996, 1280a 32-34). In other words, the community is not merely a means of serving individual ends.

Fowers (2000) has done a great service to marital therapists by showing how many marital partners have often viewed their marriages (a smaller type of “community”) as the means to their own individual happiness. Aristotle’s point here is that virtuous marriages and larger communities are ends in themselves because they involve “friends” acting in concert toward mutually recognized, constitutive goods. Many goods can only be realized with other people, such as friendship, mutual play, scholarship, democracy, and justice. This understanding of community also implies that mutual self-governance is an important expression of human sociality in the political realm. Again, virtue ethics helps with our third criterion. Communities are ends in themselves, so they require care and nurturing, which is best accomplished through some form of mutual governance.

Criterion 4. When criterion 4 says that the ethical framework should not be “dualistic,” this requirement may require a bit of explanation. It might first help to explain that a dualism is basically where one thing is wrongly considered to be two independent things (i.e., the two things are wrongly abstracted from one another). I would assert, on Aristotle’s behalf, that ethics—one thing—has been wrongly considered in Western culture to be two independent things in at least three different respects: 1) ethical principles and ethical contexts, 2) means and ends, and 3) individual preferences and community standards.

First, a truly relational ethic cannot make a dualism of ethical principles, on the one hand, and ethical contexts, on the other. In Western culture, ethical principles alone have been mistaken for ethics, as if the contexts in which they occur are merely applications or add-ons. For the strong relationist, however, unique and often changeable contexts are essential to

practical, ethical decisions. Abstracted and unchangeable principles are thus relatively contextless. They are, at best, extremely thin as ethics and, at worst, completely misleading in regard to practical morality. Aristotle's recognition of this truth is what led him to postulate the need for *phronesis*, a type of practical wisdom that takes changing practical contexts seriously in making ethical decisions.

Second, constitutive ends are also nondualistic because they cannot be separated from their means. "Eudaimonia," says Aristotle, "must be classed as an activity desirable in itself and not for the sake of something else" (Aristotle, 1999, p. 286). The end of justice, for instance, can be actualized only by engaging in just actions. Moreover, and our third aspect of nondualism, such higher order ends are rarely merely *individual* ends. According to Aristotle, they cannot be meaningfully separated from the context of others humans, and are thus communal or shared goals that require collaboration and cannot be possessed by any one individual. This means that Aristotle considered the highest goals to be nondualistic in all three senses—they are contextual, constitutive, and communal, and thus his ethics meets our fourth criterion of nondualism in every respect.

Virtue Ethics in Action

How then did Greenbrier use these features of virtue ethics to formulate the thicker aspects of its therapeutic boarding school program? Recall that our ontological stance provided some thinner ethical pieces, but it was virtue ethics, we came to realize, that put flesh on these ontological bones. I only have space to describe what Greenbrier calls "The Aspirations," but there are other aspects of our program, such as the "The Ways," that also relate explicitly to virtue ethics. As the term "aspirations" implies, it is merely another way of referring to the constitutive ends or goals of virtue ethics. Indeed, it is not unusual for the Greenbrier staff to

expressly refer to these aspirations as virtues. Aristotle considered virtues as those character strengths that make the pursuit of the good possible. For character strengths to develop, Greenbrier students have to aspire toward them as worthwhile ends in themselves. Continual aspiration ultimately means “living into” them to such a degree that they become almost second-nature or aspects of our moral character.

The Greenbrier staff selected these specific virtues (see below) for the young women to aspire toward.



Unlike other therapeutic boarding schools, the Greenbrier staff does not perceive itself to be value-free in some individualist or objectivist sense. Value-freeness is typically manifested in two different senses in other schools. Either the staff considers itself to be objective, where they attempt to incorporate only the value-free facts of therapies (e.g., evidence-based practices). Or,

they endorse a problematic form of individualism, where they attempt to adopt the values of each individual student, and thus are supposedly free from “imposing” their own values.

I believe that Aristotle would have difficulties with both forms of value-freeness. First, as a long program of research has documented (cf. Slife Smith, & Burchfield, 2003), there are no value-free therapies, or value-free studies of therapy for that matter. Each is premised on a set of values; the only issue is whether the values are hidden or taken into account. Second, adopting each student’s values would not only be potentially chaotic in a boarding school of 50 students; it would also preclude the possibility that student values are part of student problems. As I have described, there are higher- and lower- order aspirations from Aristotle’s perspective, and no aspirations are merely individual preferences or value-free in any sense.

The virtues selected for Greenbrier are also inherently relational. They begin with perhaps the first stage of a good relationship, with respect of self and other (the top-right of the figure), continue through courtesy and compassion, empathy and forgiveness, humility and honor, and move through the trust of self and others only to cycle back through these virtues whenever they are needed for the particular situation. However, students *initially* progress through these five “aspirations” one at a time. Each young woman must demonstrate “an inculcation of each virtue before moving to the next virtue, with assessments and recommendations made by a council of peers and [staff]” (Greenbrier Academy, 2010, p. 2). I should probably highlight the latter portion of this quote, because the young women of this community have a great deal to say about its governance and even the evaluation of their peers as they progress through the various virtues.

As each student progresses from one aspiration to the next, they receive additional relational opportunities and privileges with peers, staff, visitors, parents, and friends. This notion

of “addition relational opportunities and privileges” may sound suspiciously like some behavioral token economies, as the girls receive additional privileges with virtue advancement, but this is not the case. What the girls receive is what we think Aristotle would assume anyone who has attained these character strengths and goods should receive – the plaudits of peers and the experience of greater community responsibilities. After all, the care and nurturing of the community, as we have discussed, is probably best handled by its most virtuous members.

But does this portion of the Greenbrier program meet our four criteria? First, does it embody what Aristotle believes is “characteristically human goods” and thus what is natural for humans in a nonreductive sense? Here, Greenbrier’s emphasis on the young women’s sociality and a limited self-governance seem to fit nicely with Aristotle’s emphasis on human sociality, politics, and self-determination. Second, do the Greenbrier virtues put a premium on this sociality and give the students an Aristotelian sense of what quality relationships are? Before this question can be answered, it begs another: are the virtues selected eudaimonic or hedonic in nature? Here it seems obvious they are eudaimonic, because none of the aspirations are individualistic pleasures. Perhaps the more important issue is whether the staff and older girls teach and live out these virtues. On this issue, I believe I can attest that the staff intends these virtues in the highest Aristotelian sense – worthwhile in themselves and shared in a collaborative manner.

These comments about collaboration and shared purpose also relate to Greenbrier’s community, the third criterion. Does it exemplify Aristotle’s notions of the communal nature of his highest aspirations? Perhaps most obvious to anyone who visits Greenbrier is how these virtues have culminated in an almost natural altruism. I am aware of the many psychologists who claim that hedonism is the natural state of humanity, but I doubt they’ve really considered

the insights of Aristotle and Fowers, nor have they witnessed a community meeting at Greenbrier. It is impossible to capture with words the true bond these girls enjoy with one another, the authentic delight they experience for a member who's reached a particular goal, or the genuine empathy they feel for a fellow member's difficulties. Moreover, these types of relationships lead to continual and repeated projects of altruism that these young women initiate in the wider community, including a recent humanitarian trip to Ghana.

The question of the fourth criterion, concerning dualism, would be: are there separations between the constitutive parts of the virtues, especially as taught to the students? For example, are the aspirations taught as contextless principles and separated from the living situations in which actual ethics occurs? I think I can say that one of the most important aspects of the Greenbrier program is its 24/7 facilitation of real-life contexts and experiences from which the girls can truly learn the virtues. Because the students literally live at the school, there is no end to the lived peer and staff relationships that the young women suffer from, struggle with, delight in, and learn from. The object of this learning is not an abstracted moral code of principles, but a practical and contextually sensitive wisdom of the Aristotelian kind.

I say "Aristotelian kind" because I believe the ends that the Greenbrier staff encourage and facilitate are not separable from the means to attain them. The virtues of respect and courtesy, for example, can only be acquired as character strengths through the lived activities of respect and courtesy. Teaching abstracted and instrumental "social skills," for example, would rarely result in *true* respect and *true* courtesy. Moreover, the aspirations appear to be eudaimonic; they certainly do not lead to happiness in the conventional, emotionally satisfying sense. Humility, for instance, does not bring about individual self-esteem, and empathy could lead to experiences of pain and heartache, not hedonia. In all these ways, from a fully contextual

experience to a truly constitutive and communal end, I believe that the aspirations of Greenbrier are nondualistic.

At the very least, I believe that the Greenbrier example, along with our struggles in developing it, evidences the intimate connection between ontological relationality and virtue ethics. Fower's careful and sensitive explication and application of this ancient ethic has been an enormous contribution not only to the ethical literature but also to earnest projects like ours. I am not sure that we, at Greenbrier, have it exactly right, but our success as a counterweight to the excessive individualism of Western culture is, I believe, undeniable.

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¹ Fowers views divine revelation as “noticeably unsuccessful” in promulgating “one divine truth.” I think this is an interesting judgment, given the number of scholars who consider the Judeo-Christian tradition a vital source of ethical unity in Western culture. David Hart’s (2009) new book, *Atheist Delusions*, just out from Yale University Press, is particularly intriguing in this regard. Fowers (2010b) has also updated his “approaches to identifying human nature” to three, the two mentioned here plus the possibility of denying a singular human nature (p. 13).