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ARTICLE

Moral education in a time of human ecological devastation

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ABSTRACT

Stories of civilization and progress tell us that humans cannot help being destructive, selfish, and aggressive, which are side effects of progress requiring sanctions and engineering. It can be argued that this approach has brought about the ecological collapse we face today. The older, more widespread view—that human personality and behavior are shaped by social support—respects the dignity of the individual and of other than humans, disallows coercion and expects high autonomy and communalism. The latter we can call the indigenous worldview and is apparent among sustainable societies. To ensure the development of human beings who live cooperatively with one another and in concert with ecological systems, moral education approaches should restore the non-civilized, ancient practices of raising good children. This paper examines what moral education should look like in light of children's basic needs and the degraded developmental systems children often experience today.

KEYWORDS

Indigenous worldview; evolved nest; nature connection; apprenticeship; virtue; ethical skills; self-authorship

We are living in desperate times. Every week a new scientific report is issued related to the rapid deterioration of earth systems, from oceans rising and coastal regions overrun, to fishing grounds and corals dying, glaciers and freshwater diminishing, increasing pandemics and global warming already at 2 degrees Celsius in parts of the world.[1] Humans in high-income countries are more book literate but less ecologically literate, less ecologically attached and more attached to possessions, than prior generations, based on a culture that sanctions exploitation of the earth for human gain, contributing to a sixth mass extinction (Kolbert, 2014). What has happened to the human species to make it suddenly so holistically detached and destructive after millions of years of existence?

Stories of civilization and progress tell us that humans cannot help being destructive—it's a side effect of 'progress.' Dominant stories about why humans are selfish and aggressive also tell us that humans are innately so, requiring sanctions and engineering. Such views are relatively rare among human societies through time, though now they have spread across the world through forced economic globalization. In contrast, most societies believed that a supportive community was required to grow and maintain a person's human nature, starting before birth. Which worldview should guide moral education? The recent and relatively rare 'civilized' worldview—that humans are innately

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bad and need to be coerced and engineered to be good—that sanctions suppression of children's unique spirits and includes a domineering attitude toward nature, which has led us to the point of ecological collapse? Or the older more widespread view—that human personality and behavior are shaped by social support—that respects the dignity of the individual and of other than humans, disallowing coercion and expecting high autonomy and communalism? The latter we can call the indigenous worldview and it is apparent among sustainable societies. To ensure the development of human beings who live in concert with ecological systems, moral education approaches should restore the non-civilized, ancient practices of raising good children. This paper examines what that looks like in light of the degraded developmental systems children often experience today.

Baselines have shifted (Narvaez, 2016a; Narvaez & Witherington, 2018). An accurate deep history view of *homo sapiens* shows us that we have wandered off the species-normal pathway of raising good, virtuous, connected human beings (Christen et al., 2017; Narvaez, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016b, 2016c, 2018).[2] Industrialized child raising practices break the continuum of bondedness to the living web, establishing a sense of disconnection deep within the child's psyche that lasts a lifetime without intervention. As a result, industrialized societies tend to raise humans poorly and then try to fix the dysregulated results with all sorts of sanctions and manipulations.

When we observe societies around the world outside of industrialized nations, especially those who have no established hierarchies, we notice an approach to moral development that is not top-down but one that is more bottom-up, emerging from ancient evolved practices of a life lived in companionship (Narvaez, 2014). These small-band hunter-gatherer societies (SBHG) are the kind of society in which our genus is presumed to have spent 99% of its history and, while under some stress, still exist all over the world (Lee & Daly, 2005). Adults in these societies are fiercely egalitarian, highly communal and highly autonomous. The adults have cooperative, calm, and generous personalities, missing many of the characteristics we think are normal human nature such as self-centeredness, aggression, alienation and disconnection from the natural world (Ingold, 2005; Narvaez, 2013). Similarly, among First Nation communities, the goals of adult life involve staying in balance with one's relationships, learning to listen to one's unique inner spirit, and developing one's gifts for community benefit (Deloria, 2006; Four Arrows, 2016; Four Arrows & Narvaez, 2016). In every moment, one seeks to maintain respectful and responsible relationships with 'all our relations' (humans, the more than human, ancestors and future generations), aware of the dynamic and mysterious nature of Life, and trying to live intelligently within Life's many realms. The !Kung of southern Africa prevent ego inflation in self and others with particular practices (e.g., 'insulting the meat' of a successful hunter; Lee, 1979), thereby avoiding the wetiko virus (egoistic cannibalization/exploitation of the lives of others) which now seems to have spread around the world (Forbes, 2008).

One of the key components for proper, species-typical development, described by anthropologists among SBHG communities, is the developmental system our species evolved to optimize normal development (Hewlett & Lamb, 2005). Every animal has a developmental system for raising offspring that matches up with offspring maturation. Our lab calls humanity's evolved system the *evolved developmental niche* (EDN) or *evolved nest*. SBHG provide the evolved nest, which appears to be a cultural commons

Table 1. Human evolved nest for young children provisioned by a community[a].

(1)	**Soothing Perinatal Experiences**: *no separation from mother or induced pain*
(1)	**Positive (and no negative) touch**: *Held or kept near others constantly*
(1)	**Response relationships**: *Prompt response to keep baby in optimal arousal*
(1)	**Breastfeeding**: *on request (2–3 times/hr initially) for 2–5 yrs*
(1)	**Play**: *Self-directed free play in natural world with multiage playmates*
(1)	**Alloparents**: *Frequently cared for by individuals other than mothers (fathers and grandmothers, in particular)*
(1)	**Positive Social Support**: *High social embeddedness and positive climate*

[a]Hewlett & Lamb, 2005; Konner, 2010; Narvaez et al., 2013.

for the development of a cooperative human nature (Narvaez, 2014, 2016c). See Table 1 for the components of the nest which are by and large 20–40 million years old, having emerged with social mammals, forming the species-typical way of raising human children too. When these experiences are missing—undercare—physical and mental health, sociality and wellbeing can be impaired (Narvaez et al., 2016, 2013, 2014).

Caregivers who provide the nest yield to the needs of the baby without delay or reluctance. Caregiving is empathic, resonant with the emotional and neurobiological state of the child, maintaining optimal arousal (usually calmness or joy). Such humble, responsive caregiving brings about a cooperative personality. As converging neurobiological research studies demonstrate, the evolved nest supports the development of a healthy neurobiology. Our lab's work is examining the relation of early experience to social and moral capacities in cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, finding significant impacts of evolved nest components on child and adult outcomes (Narvaez, Gleason et al., 2013; Narvaez et al., 2016a; Narvaez, Wang et al., 2013; Narvaez et al., 2019).

What happened? Why are modern societies pushing humanity in the opposite direction of virtuous lives and sustainable living?

Evolved nest provision started its decline from the beginning of settled agricultural societies when working the fields took the attention of adults and lessened attention to child raising (e.g., decreased breastfeeding). The degraded nest has worsened in recent centuries with industrialization and global capitalism. Industrialized nations of today, like the USA,[3] pretty much expect and endorse/enforce the opposite of the nest.[4] They have pervasive atmospheres of anxiety and social alienation that start from the beginning of life due to a misunderstanding of children's evolved needs and the species-normal system to support their development. Families have forgotten, have been misinformed, or are urged to suppress instincts to provide the nest, whose components are outlined in Table 1. In the USA, work takes priority over everything else and there are few supports for families (no paid parental leave, no paid child care, spotty healthcare and education, limited wages and work freedom for most of the population). As a result, many US adults themselves live unnested with few supports, leading to parental blocked care—the inability to be nurturing in the way children need for proper development (Hughes & Baylin, 2015).

Unnestedness passes on to the next generations. Parents who had poor childhood nests often make poor parents themselves, and, without healing interventions, can pass on primal wounds to their children (e.g., insecure attachment; Schore, 2013, 2019). With

a degraded nest, many children can arrive at school under- or mis-developed, exhibiting developmental delays, behaviors that look like disobedience but represent malformed stress response, displayed in aggression or withdrawal. Children arrive with primal wounds that misdirect their sociality toward social self-protection, bracing against others, in part because so many social subskills were not learned in babyhood, and in part because they are highly threat reactive from early undercare, thwarting the growth of such skills.

Neurobiologically, without nest experiences to grow sociality, the brain-mind is left to focus on self-concern. Among those who are well fed and responded to but with engineered early lives, dopaminergic SEEKING systems can be enhanced which leads to energetic pursuit of accomplishment. Among those who have inconsistent care (or worse) in early life, they may never feel quite safe or trusting. The development of self and self-in-community goes off track. The child doesn't learn egalitarian flexible responsiveness bottom up but under ego threat learns to downshift to more biologically primitive neurobiological systems of dominance-submission relations—if you are not the one 'up' you are the one 'down,' a 'loser.' Receptive intelligence to other humans and more than humans does not develop properly. Instead of relational, creative openness, life can become a fear-based competition, a bracing against others, or a relationally detached cognitive exercise. Individuals dominated by such processes may not live intelligently but reactively, easily downshifting to being guided by primitive survival systems. With adequate support, such individuals may succeed in schools that emphasize cognition (which doesn't require sufficient socioemotional or moral intelligence) but can become unsettled, subtly anxiety-driven individuals who run the world.

The biggest gap in development among civilized people (whether in the USA or not) is a lack of nature connection or ecological attachment. The move to farms then cities eroded contact with wilderness, increased a sense of separation from natural systems and over time fostered a sense of superiority as the rest of nature was viewed as full of objects instead of relations (Merchant, 2003; Turner, 1994).

Moral education needs today

Moral education is initially *neuro*education (Narvaez, 2012), from conception on, guided by caregiver attitudes and behaviors as well as the support of the community (the village). Stress during pregnancy, birth or early life can have long-term effects on neurobiological systems as individuals self-organize their biological systems around experience (for a review, see Narvaez, 2014). When children reach school age, the neurobiological foundations for morality and sociality have already been laid. Teachers face students who have already developed a subconscious set of filters for social life and for learning. With so many children unnested today, especially in the USA, teachers have their work cut out for them.

What are educators to do? They will need to establish a sustaining school and classroom climate (Narvaez, 2010a). First, it is important to understand that most misbehavior is stress-related behavior (Shanker, 2016). When students act out or withdraw, they are using ways they have learned to regulate themselves, to get back to a sense of homeostasis. Making a snide remark, pushing a classmate, or emotionally

withdrawing, helps them rebalance their sense of safety. Of course, these are not healthy ways to self-regulate. So, the first thing to do is to help students learn to self-calm in healthy ways (Halloran, 2018). Belly breathing, meditation and other forms of body relaxation can be practiced that help students center themselves in more appropriate ways.

However, calmness is not enough for moral or virtuous behavior. A person must feel connected to others, for example, like they belong to the group, are appreciated and can grow as a person (Lantieri, 2001). Many students arrive at school with limited social experience and even preferences for doing things alone, as a result of a history of limited family and community care and greater experience with screens (Turkle, 2017). Too often students don't know how to relate to others in smooth, skilled ways, lacking social and emotional intelligence, and so become easily frustrated and socially discouraged (Elias et al., 1997). Social remediation is needed that includes multiple ways to practice social cooperation and, particularly, creative social joy in order to grow cooperative capacities (Murphy, 2016). These can be folk song games and other forms of whole-body social play, which promote growth in emotional presence and self-regulation. Such play fosters right brain hemisphere development, which is often underdeveloped from early life undercare.

Third, students may also have limited imaginations, focusing their daily or life goals on primitive interests like consuming or 'winning' (power). Along with communal experiences, teachers can emphasize communal imagination, a sense of global citizenship, 'us and us' instead of 'us-against-them' (Oser & Veugelers, 2008). Educators can help expand imagination to perceive being part of the web of life with immersion in the natural world, evidence from science about the intelligent natures of plants, animals and soil, and guidance from native science about the interconnections of living things (Cajete, 2000).

Overall, it is important to help students develop not just the intellect but their 'heart-mind,' which involves practices of self-actualization (Lantieri, 2001; WindEagle & RainbowHawk, 2003). The heartmind involves connecting the inner spiritual self to outward behavior by developing intuition and action capacities. Educating prosocial intuition occurs through deliberate immersion and coaching about relationships, connections and self-understanding.

Classroom moral character education

Based on a review of research and developed in collaboration with school teachers in the USA, the RAVES model[5] gives a step by step approach to helping teachers set up the conditions for an ethical classroom and the shaping of students' lifelong pathways toward virtue. How do children grow into morally agile adults? The RAVES model emphasizes the development of moral virtue capacities through five steps, relationships, apprenticeship, virtuous role models, ethical skill development, and self-authorship (See Table 2).

Table 2. The RAVES model for classroom moral character development.

Relationships (relational realms: classroom, wider community, natural world)
Apprenticeship (modeling, guidance from someone more expert; extensive focused practice)
Virtuous Village and Stories of social support brought to the classroom and celebrated
Ethical skills (sensitivity, judgment, focus, action)
Self authorship (self development and self monitoring of action choices)

Relationships

For most students, a warmly secure relationship with the teacher facilitates attention and achievement (Watson & Eckert, 2018). In such relationships, children's relational (instead of self-protective) emotions (and biochemistry) are engaged, allowing the teacher to influence the child's development towards positive growth. Some students, based on past trauma or neglect, may take longer to 'warm up' and relax into the student–teacher relationship and an accompanying learning mode (Watson & Eckert, 2018). Setting up and maintaining secure relationships with students requires educators to have good social skills and knowhow for building rapport with diverse students from different backgrounds (Banks, 2015).

The second aspect of RAVES' relational focus is the climate of the classroom. A supportive community is needed for optimal growth. Experiencing a supportive community through face-to-face relational engagement keeps members calm and in social moods. In caring classrooms, basic needs are met for belonging, autonomy, self-enhancement, trust, and meaningfulness (Solomon et al., 1996). Educators can emphasize each student's positive potential and an orientation to group citizenship with activities that promote self-understanding, group cohesion and prosocial narratives.

The third aspect of RAVES' relational focus is ecological. Each individual lives within an active ecological context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) in which, ideally, the entire community builds ethical skills together. The purpose of ethical behavior is to live a good life *in the community* (Aristotle, 1988). But what community? In industrialized societies, community typically refers only to human beings. But in Indigenous sustainable communities, relationships include animals, plants and other entities in the local landscape (Narvaez et al., 2019). Educators can help students develop their understanding of membership in complex earth ecologies (Jacobs, 2001). Educators help students develop a sense of ecological attachment through activities that immerse students' partnership activities with the natural world (Kimmerer, 2013). Earth-based wisdom is apparent in Aldo Leopold's observation: 'A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise' (Leopold, 1949/2013, p. 188). Educators can present the Indigenous worldview with stories of ecological connection from native traditions, emphasizing a *Sacred Life and Living Earth* story instead of the *Sacred Money and Markets* story that is destroying biocultural diversity and causing irreversible planetary damage from human feverish obsession with exploitation (Korten, 2015; Narvaez et al., 2019).

Apprenticeship

Human beings learn most things in life without effort but through immersed, often guided, experiences that interest the learner (Stadler & Frensch, 1998). Social, emotional

and moral learning are of interest to students and also come about from immersed experience in the workings of the classroom community. However, it is important to not let this happen accidentally or unintentionally (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2008). Educators can make deliberate choices about classroom structures and activities, model appropriate behavior, think aloud when solving social and moral problems, and coach students on particular skills (below) that foster moral agility. The educator can use an accelerated apprenticeship model where the mentor coaches the learner during immersed authentic experience, explaining the reasoning and meaning of practices. And the learner's practice of skills is *focused and extensive.*

Virtuous village

The classroom teacher does not and cannot influence the moral agility of her students by herself. As social creatures, children are influenced by a village of older children and adults. Experiencing and observing the kindness, generosity, respect, compassion, forgiveness, humility, and courage of community members inspires students to walk the same path. The village provides multiple *examples* of virtue in action, the *mentoring* needed by students to develop such virtues, and multiple *opportunities* to imitate and practice virtue under the guidance of those village members (Young, 2019). Ideally, moral exemplars are local community members but when this is not the case, there are books and online sources for such role models, such as Hillary and Chelsea Clinton's book, *The Book of Gutsy Women*, or the website, *Teaching Tolerance*.

Ideally, the village also provides a positive social climate where community members experience more positive than negative emotions—more joy, serenity, expansiveness rather than sadness, anger, fear, humiliation. Our human heritage, among SBHG, is to spend daily time in ongoing social engagement that includes singing and dancing, laughing and teasing, telling stories and jokes (Gray, 2014). Adults tell their stories about the experiences of ancestors and legends as a means to educate the young about how one's character is shaped by one's choices, expanding children's imaginations about their connections to ancestors and the community. Stories shape what students believe about themselves and the world, suggesting what and whom they can become, guiding action. Students can bring their traditions to the classroom, sharing the stories that inspire them.

These activities promote neurobiological mindsets that enhance physiological and social health (oxytocin, prolactin, serotonin) (Carter & Porges, 2013). Ideally, each student feels loved, cherished, and appreciated by community members, knows how to create positive reactions in others and develop deep friendships. Our lab finds that adults who report more positive emotion in childhood are more secure, mentally healthier, less distressed and less likely to have a self-protective morality (Narvaez, 2016b, 2018; Narvaez, Wang & Cheng, 2016a).

Ethical skills

If we examine what morally virtuous persons know, we can identify the kinds of skills they coordinate in every situation (Narvaez, 2010b; Narvaez & Bock, 2014). We can call this ethical expertise. Those with ethical expertise show more ethical sensitivity

Table 3. Four ethical processes with suggested skills and subskills.

Ethical Sensitivity
- **Connect to Others** (be civil and courteous, show friendship and care, work with diversity, manage aggression)
- **Communicate Well** (Expressing emotion, speaking and listening, monitoring communication)
- **Take the Perspectives of Others** (take different perspectives: justice, mercy, cultural; determine what is happening; perceive moral issues)
- **Control Social Bias** (diagnose and overcome personal bias, nurture tolerance)

Ethical Judgment
- **Solve Ethical Problems** (gathering information, predicting consequences)
- **Critical Reasoning** (using sound reasoning, monitor reasoning, making right choices)
- **Develop Codes and Code Shifting** (determining appropriate codes, choosing environments and activities, making good choices)
- **Coping and Resiliency** (apply positive thinking, develop resiliency)

Ethical Focus
- **Value Community Traditions and Institutions** (understand social structures, practice democracy, cooperate)
- **Cultivate Conscience** (self-command, be honorable, good stewardship, good citizenship)
- **Respect Others** (cultivate wisdom, show reverence)
- **Develop Ethical Identity & Integrity** (reaching your potential, finding purpose, cultivate commitment)

Ethical Action
- **Resolve Conflicts and Problems** (negotiate, make amends, stand up under pressure)
- **Take Ethical Action** (think strategically, get help, respond creatively)
- **Take Initiative as a Leader** (attend to human needs, assert respectfully, mentor others)
- **Work Hard** (set reachable goals, manage time, be steadfast, develop competence, take charge of your life)

For classroom activity suggestions, see Narvaez, 2009; Narvaez & Bock, 2009; Narvaez & Endicott, 2009; Narvaez & Lies, 2009.

(perceptive, imaginative, deeply feeling) and better ethical judgment (reasoning, reflection), are more ethically focused (attentive, motivated, personal identity) and are better at completing ethical action (effectiveness, steadfastness) (Narvaez & Rest, 1995; Rest, 1983). In ancestral conditions where children were immersed in the community's social life, such skills would have developed holistically—bottom up initially from immersed experience, and later also top down from explicit guidance—and in culturally appropriate ways. But in places like the USA, much of children's experience rides against ethical skills and towards vice because of haphazard childhood experiences, immersion in violent media and lack of support. And so, educators can most effectively nurture the moral life through intentionally designing their instruction to include ethical skill development within academic instruction (Narvaez, 2005). See Table 3 for a sampling of possible skills and subskills to integrate in the school and classroom.

Self-Authorship

Humans have a long maturational schedule (three decades) and so need mentors and guidance to practice self-development all along the way. Little by little children learn to monitor their behavior and choices. Virtuous individuals must be autonomous enough to monitor themselves through the selection of appropriate friends, activities, and environments (Aristotle, 1988). Educators can help students develop the tools for self-authorship that students will be able to employ after they move on. Here are some suggestions aimed at practices that grow socioemotional intelligence that I recommend and use with college students (Narvaez, 2014):

- Learn to know the self in terms of likes and dislikes, feelings and reactions, what builds positive connection, strengths and weaknesses.
- Avoid ego inflation by learning self-calming strategies, mind shifting strategies, and action skills to avoid self- or other-dismissal or harming.
- Learn to play spontaneously with others in prosocial ways (to grow social pleasure, empathy, self-control, receptivity, and presence)
- Learn to stay feeling relationally connected to others rather than detached, superior or inferior.
- Establish practices that keep ecological attachment alive (e.g., walking in parks without headset, acknowledging other than humans as living companions; Kurth et al., 2020).
- Learn to attend to consequences, short and long term, of personal and group decisions, always with the web of life in mind.

All these are forms of self and community self-actualization and are necessary to return to living sustainably within the web of life on earth.

Conclusion

Our students face a badly depleted planet. They will need their fullest capacities to address the increasing and unpredictable challenges a subset of humans has caused and to find ways to restore ecological systems. The RAVES model offers a set of practices to frame moral character educational practice in intentional ways that help students reach their moral potential.

When children are undercared for in light of our species-normal developmental system and come to school psychically wounded and physiologically under- or mis-developed (perhaps 2/3 of children in USA classrooms), the RAVES model is designed to help children heal, reconnect and grow in moral virtue.

A key component of the RAVES model today, often missing in moral educational approaches, is inclusion of the other than human in one's community of concern. We can call this by many names—land ethic, nature connection, or earth ethics. Developing the heartmind to include one's care and responsibility for one's local landscape and the earth community generally is fundamental to moral character education today. Indigenous societies around the world can help us remember how to reconnect and rejoin the biocommunity in ways our ancestors practiced.

Notes

1. There are many (conservative) reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, among other scientific reports and warnings. See also Kolbert (2014).
2. Unless otherwise noted, most of the information presented is from the reviews in these publications.
3. The problems I describe are from data in the USA where wellbeing has deteriorated among all ages. The USA tends to export its ways to other countries and so it may be important for all readers to have a sense of what has happened in the USA, an experiment in action.
4. Civilization likes to tout itself as solving longstanding human problems (e.g., Pinker, 2011). But any knowledge of our deep history shows the opposite to be true. Civilization brought

about decreased health (e.g., decreased height), epidemics, war, slavery, colonization, toxification of the planet, overpopulation, species extermination, etc. (e.g., Narvaez, 2019; Small, 2008). All these problems still plague the world. When civilized humans invent something to counteract some part of these challenges, it is treated as showing the superiority of civilization, with no understanding that civilization itself brought about the problem in the first place.

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