

Educating for Intellectual Virtues: A Fourth Option in Character Education

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Character education has traditionally focused on the promotion of moral and civic character virtues like respect, kindness, compassion, civility, and tolerance.¹ Recently, however, the notions of “performance character” and “performance strengths” have been introduced as a way of capturing a dimension of character that seems at once highly relevant to academic performance but also something of a departure from the categories of traditional character education. Performance strengths include perseverance, self-discipline, resilience, ingenuity, and grit.² My aim in this paper is to develop and defend a fourth dimension of personal character: namely, intellectual character. Intellectual character is not entirely separable from moral, civic, or performance character. However, it is separable enough to be worth distinguishing. Indeed, I will argue that an approach to character education that aims at fostering growth in intellectual virtues like curiosity, attentiveness, open-mindedness, intellectual courage, and intellectual humility enjoys some unique advantages compared with other approaches.

1. Intellectual Character

As with traditional character education, philosophical reflection on character and virtues has tended to focus on the moral and civic dimensions of personal character. While these discussions cover much of the relevant territory, they do not cover it all. In particular, they fail to give sufficient attention to the dimension of personal character that bears directly on cognition, and more specifically, on the pursuit of distinctively epistemic goods like knowledge, truth, and understanding.

Philosophical treatments of knowledge and knowing, especially since the modern period, have tended to focus either on the more mechanistic (rather than personal or volitional) aspects of cognition or on the epistemic status of particular propositions or types of propositions (e.g. propositions about the external world).³ While philosophers like Descartes and Locke, for instance, did occasionally attend to the more active or volitional aspects of cognition, their work in this area is not especially systematic or extensive. Nor did they tend to view these aspects as continuous with or conceptually isomorphic with moral character.

Just a little bit of reflection reveals the limitation of such a focus. Suppose, with most epistemologists today, that the primary goal of cognition is something like truth or true belief.⁴ In some cases, getting to the truth is easy. Forming true beliefs about the physical appearance of one's immediate surroundings or about the salient contents of one's current mental states typically makes few if any demands on a knower's agency or character. In other circumstances, however, this is far from the case. Consider, for instance, what might be required for reaching the truth about the details of some ancient historical event. Or, somewhat differently, about the bearing of a prima facie plausible counter-argument on the truth of a cherished belief? In cases like this, reaching the truth does make demands on cognitive agents *qua* agents. Specifically, it demands an exercise of intellectual character virtues like intellectual tenacity, intellectual thoroughness, open-mindedness, and intellectual humility. As Linda Zagzebski has argued, while epistemically oriented, these traits otherwise mirror the content and structure of what we typically think of as moral virtues.⁵ The upshot, then, is that there is a dimension of personal character that is central

to good cognition but that has, as it were, slipped through the cracks between moral philosophy and the theory of knowledge.

Such neglect has received a direct and forceful challenge from virtue epistemology, an approach to the theory of knowledge that gives a central role to reflection on intellectual virtues. One major strand of virtue epistemology—known as “virtue responsibilism” or “character-based” virtue epistemology—conceives of intellectual virtues as good intellectual character traits on the model of Aristotelian moral virtues.⁶ According to these philosophers, a person’s intellectual character is a function of her psychological orientation toward epistemic ends or goals like knowledge, truth, and understanding. An intellectually virtuous person desires knowledge and understanding; and this fundamental orientation disposes her to think and inquire in ways that are reflective, honest, open, careful, fair, and the like.

My contention, again, is that intellectual character is importantly (albeit not entirely or categorically) distinct from the types or dimensions of character widely recognized in the character education literature today; and, moreover, that an approach to character education grounded in a model of intellectual character has special significance and promise.⁷

2. Dimensions of Character: Moral, Civic, Performance, and Intellectual

How, then, is intellectual character related to these other dimensions of character? One effective way of answering this question is by focusing on the fundamental aim or goal proper to intellectual virtues.

As suggested earlier, intellectual virtues have their motivational basis in something like a “love of learning” or a desire for truth, knowledge, understanding, or the like. They

are intrinsically epistemically oriented.⁸ Compare this with what we typically think of as moral virtues.⁹ We tend to think of morally virtuous persons as being motivated, not by epistemic goods, but rather by distinctively moral ends like social justice, peace, the alleviation of poverty, suffering, and related evils. For this reason it makes sense to think of moral virtues as the character traits of a good neighbor (in the biblical sense) and intellectual virtues as the character traits of a good thinker or inquirer.

But, of course, one can be a good neighbor without thirsting for knowledge or understanding of physical, biological, political, historical, or related spheres of reality. The converse is also true. A formidable and successful scientist might lust after knowledge and understanding, and out of this orientation think and inquire in ways that are thoughtful, open, rigorous, careful, and persevering, while nevertheless being systematically cold and insensitive to his family, colleagues, and other relations. Thus it appears possible for a person to possess a fairly high degree of intellectual virtue without much moral virtue and for a person with a high degree of moral virtue to possess relatively little in the way of intellectual virtue.

A similar distinction can be drawn between intellectual character and civic character. The aim of civic virtues is something like the well-being or good of the community as a whole.¹⁰ Civic virtues include traits like civility, respect, cooperation, tolerance, and community-mindedness. It is not hard to identify some possible divergence between these traits and intellectual virtues. Like the advocate of social justice, a virtuous community organizer, for instance, might have little interest in the life of mind. And the intellectually virtuous scientist might also fail to be motivated, even in part, by a concern with how her research will benefit society at large.

It is worth noting, however, that the skills and qualities of a “critical thinker” are often closely associated with good civic character. A good citizen, for instance, needs to know how to inform herself, to sort through competing arguments and claims, and to make evidence-based decisions.¹¹ However, the epistemic focus and concern here are, strictly speaking, instrumental to the goal of a well-functioning community or society: they are not a concern or focus on knowledge or learning as such. In this way, a distinction between civic and intellectual character remains.

The concept of “performance” character was introduced by Thomas Lickona and Matthew Davidson as a way of capturing a dimension of good character that is at least somewhat distinct from moral character but that has special relevance to teaching and learning.¹² There are some important and obvious similarities between performance character and intellectual character. Neither, for instance, has an overtly moral dimension; and each has obvious relevance to the domain of thinking and learning. However, performance character is at once broader and narrower than intellectual character.

To see why it is broader, note that performance virtues are described as having immediate application across a wide range of domains and activities, from athletics to business to academics. Indeed, while performance character may be receiving special attention in education circles, there would not appear to be anything about performance character itself that makes it more relevant to education than to any other domain in which success requires a long-term commitment and the overcoming of various challenges.¹³ Intellectual character is different. Again, it pertains specifically to the domain of seeking, refining, and transmitting knowledge and related epistemic goods. It bears on epistemically

oriented activities like thinking, reasoning, reflecting, interpreting, and analyzing. And it is rooted in a love of knowledge and learning.

How then is performance character narrower than intellectual character?

Performance character, as it is standardly described, seems primarily to be a matter of pressing on, persevering, not quitting in the pursuit of some goal; hence the idea of “grit” and perseverance as paradigm instances of performance virtues. As already suggested, this certainly is relevant to the pursuit of knowledge or a good education: success in this domain often requires grit, diligence, perseverance, and so on. However, there is much more to a virtuous orientation toward epistemic goods than is captured by a virtuous disposition to press on, persevere, and the like, in pursuit of these goods.

Consider virtues like curiosity, wonder, reflectiveness, open-mindedness, and intellectual humility. Persistent curiosity can, of course, be critical to bringing an inquiry to completion; however, it is also characteristically what motivates inquiry to begin with—what gets it off the ground. Similarly, wonder is not really about moving forward in the pursuit of a goal: rather, it is often about pausing to appreciate, reflect on, even to *feel* some point or question or reality. Open-mindedness, reflectiveness, intellectual carefulness, and intellectual caution can have a similar function. Thus good intellectual character is not infrequently a matter of going *slow*, of proceeding in a thoughtful way, and of savoring value embedded in the process of thinking and learning. In this respect, its scope is notably broader than the scope of performance character.¹⁴

A distinction between performance character and intellectual character can also be drawn in a related and complementary way. As Marvin Berkowitz and William Puka have observed, performance virtues are, in a sense, evaluatively neutral.¹⁵ To say that someone

is disposed to persevere or has “grit” is not necessarily to say anything good about this person, since this person’s perseverance or grit may be ill-motivated: the person may persevere or show grit in pursuit of a wicked end. By contrast, intellectual virtues are motivated by epistemic *goods* like knowledge and understanding.¹⁶

The emerging picture is one according to which moral character, civic character, and intellectual character can be defined *motivationally*, that is, in terms of the sorts of ends or goals at which they aim. Again, moral character is a matter of how a person is disposed to act, think, and feel in connection with distinctively moral ends like justice, peace, or the alleviation of suffering, civic character is concerned with a person’s orientation toward well-being of the community as a whole, and intellectual character is concerned with a person’s orientation toward intellectual or epistemic ends like knowledge and truth. Performance character, by contrast, is best understood in *procedural* terms—in terms of *how* one pursues a particular goal, and, in particular, of how one proceeds in the face of various challenges or obstacles to the achievement of a goal. As such it cuts across the different dimensions just noted. Strong performance character is needed in academic and other intellectual pursuits. It is also needed in civic and moral pursuits: the bumbling or akratic moral or civic agent is hardly virtuous.

My own view is that this way of carving things up is, from a purely conceptual or philosophical standpoint, is an oversimplification.¹⁷ Nevertheless, for educational purposes, I think the picture is accurate enough. As Scott Seider’s recent book *Character Compass* illustrates, there are discernible and educationally significant differences between what we might reasonably label moral, civic, and performance character. I am suggesting, as Seider himself alludes to in the final pages of his book,¹⁸ that there is at least one

additional distinct dimension of personal character that is highly relevant to educational theory and practice. This again is the dimension of intellectual character.

3. The Promise of Intellectual Character Education

In the remainder of the paper, I will briefly highlight a few advantages of an approach to character education that is grounded in a conception of intellectual character. The aim of such an approach, naturally enough, is to foster significant growth in intellectual character virtues like curiosity, open-mindedness, attentiveness, and intellectual rigor.¹⁹

One fairly standard misgiving about character education in its traditional forms is that it requires the promotion of certain moral, political, or religious ideas or values that are out of place in public education.²⁰ One advantage of intellectual character education is that it requires no such thing. To get behind this approach, one need only believe that knowledge and learning are good and worth pursuing and that the personal qualities critical to achieving and making good use of knowledge should be deliberately fostered in educational settings. One advantage of “intellectual character education is that it provides a way of making character education “safe” for public school environments.²¹

A related objection to character education is that anything approximating an explicit and systematic concern with fostering moral or civic virtues, whatever its value in principle, simply is not feasible given everything else that educators today are expected to cover and do for their students today. This objection might appear to have equal force against an explicit and systematic concern with fostering intellectual virtues.

However, this objection belies a misconception of what it would look like to foster intellectual virtues in an educational setting. While at its best this process is multifaceted and dynamic, one central and promising means of fostering growth in intellectual virtues is

through an active and reflective engagement with academic content, that is, through an active and reflective engagement with the curricular staples of math, science, history, literature, and the like. This is a function of the fact that character virtues arise through the practice or repetition of virtuous actions.²² Applied to intellectual virtues, the idea is that the traits in question develop through thinking, reading, interpreting, reflecting, analyzing, and discussing academic content in ways that are inquisitive, attentive, careful, thorough, honest, and so on. Moreover, it is quite plausible that engaging with academic content and ideas in these ways—as opposed ways that are, say, passive, unreflective, or non-interactive—will have at least some positive bearing on academic performance and achievement.²³

There appears, then, to be an important connection between teaching for intellectual virtues and academic engagement and performance. For this reason, the enterprise of intellectual character education does not require choosing between teaching for academic standards or similar objectives, on the one hand, and teaching for intellectual character growth, on the other.

The two advantages of intellectual character education noted thus far are primarily advantages vis-à-vis moral and civic character education. They are advantages largely *shared* by performance character education. A third advantage is an advantage relative even to this latter approach.

I noted earlier that the scope of intellectual character in one respect is broader than the scope of performance character. Again, when it comes to the learning process, performance virtues seem primarily relevant to the successful *completion* of intellectual

goals and tasks—to persevering when the going gets tough, and so on. Intellectual virtues, by contrast, are relevant to *all* aspects of the learning process.

On one way of categorizing intellectual virtues, the traits in question can be placed in different groups or “clusters” based on their relevance to the different stages of inquiry.²⁴ One group of virtues—e.g. curiosity, wonder, intellectual humility, and intellectual autonomy—is especially pertinent to getting the learning process started and headed in the right direction. A second group is relevant to making inquiry go well once it is already underway. This includes attentiveness, intellectual carefulness, and intellectual thoroughness. A third group is helpful for dealing with certain obstacles that tend to arise in the context of inquiry. It includes open-mindedness, intellectual courage, and intellectual perseverance.

Performance character seems to be relevant primarily to the third category. And even here its relevance is somewhat limited. For example, one major obstacle to expanding one’s mind or knowledge base is an inability or unwillingness to consider counter-evidence or perspectives that might be hostile to one’s own. For this reason, open-mindedness is an indispensable intellectual virtue. But open-mindedness is not standardly thought of as a performance virtue. Again, this is because it is not primarily about persevering, following through, showing self-discipline, and so on.

My suggestion, then, is that educating for intellectual virtues lends itself to a characterological focus across or throughout the learning process in a way that educating primarily for performance virtues does not.

I conclude with an acknowledgement that there are bound to be tradeoffs with any approach to character education, whether intellectual, moral, civic, performance, or

otherwise. Nor do I wish to be interpreted as claiming that intellectual character education is the only viable approach to character education or that it cannot be combined with other more familiar approaches. It remains, however, that intellectual character education is presently the least recognized and least developed alternative of those considered above. For this and related reasons I have seen fit to highlight some of its distinctive advantages.

¹ See e.g. Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character* (New York: Bantam, 1991).

² The notion of performance character was introduced by Thomas Lickona and Matthew Davidson in *Smart and Good High Schools* (Center for the 4th and 5th Rs and the Character Education Partnership, 2005). For recent work on this and related concepts, see Angela Duckworth et al, "Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long-Term Goals," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 92/6 (2007): 1087-1101, and Paul Tough, *How Children Succeed* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012).

³ See Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 1-76.

⁴ Or, somewhat more broadly, "cognitive contact with reality" (Zagzebski, *op cit.*, p. 45 *passim*), which makes room for understanding, wisdom, and other epistemic goods the value of which may transcend that of truth.

⁵ See her *Virtues of the Mind*, 77-258.

⁶ For more on virtue epistemology, and for some well-developed accounts of the basic nature and structure of intellectual virtues, see Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*, Robert Roberts and Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), and Jason Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011). For an account of intellectual character education within educational psychology, see Ron Ritchhart *Intellectual Character* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002).

⁷ Such an approach is also briefly discussed, albeit not elaborated on, in Scott Seider, *Character Compass* (Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2012) and David Shields, "Character as the Aim of Education," *Phi Delta Kappan* 92/8 (2011): 48-53. While he does not speak specifically in terms of "intellectual virtues" and does not seem to view his approach as very continuous with "character education" in the traditional sense, Ritchhart's *Intellectual Character* goes a considerable way toward demonstrating what it might look like "on the ground" to educate for intellectual virtues.

⁸ It does not follow, of course, that an intellectually virtuous person will not also aim at, and even sometimes use her intellectual virtues in the service of, non-epistemic ends, including various moral or civic ends.

⁹ "What we typically think of" is intentional, as there may be a broad enough conception of "moral" such that intellectual virtues just are a subset of moral virtues. For more on this, see Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind*, 206-222.

¹⁰ See Shields, "Character as an Aim of Education," 51-52, and Seider, *Character Compass*, 32-33.

¹¹ See e.g. Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit* (Princeton, Princeton UP, 2010).

¹² Lickona and Davidson, "Smart and Good High Schools," 16-31.

¹³ This is evident in Seider's recent remark that performance strengths seem to be "the qualities possessed by entrepreneurs and politicians rather than activists or moral exemplars" (*op. cit.*, 3).

¹⁴ Of course, one could define "performance character" more broadly, such that it would cover all dimensions of inquiry. See e.g. "Performance Values," a position paper published by the Character Education Partnership, April 2008 (www.character.org). While this broader construal may minimize the difference between intellectual character and performance character, it also threatens to dilute the latter concept.

¹⁵ "Dissent and Character Education," *Reclaiming Dissent* (Amsterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009), p. 108.

¹⁶ This does not entail that *all* knowledge is epistemically good any more than the corresponding claim about moral virtues entails that, say, all pain is bad.

¹⁷ See Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind*, 206-222.

¹⁸ *Character Compass*, pp. 231-232.

¹⁹ See Ritchhart, *Intellectual Virtue*, for an idea of what this might look like in practice.

²⁰ See Robert Nash, *Answering the Virtuecrats* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).

²¹ This alternative approach may seem objectionable to some on the other (right-learning) end of the political spectrum. In response, I briefly note that intellectual character education should not be confused with an approach that is fundamentally suspicious of authority or tradition or that primarily emphasizes skepticism (intellectual trust and intellectual humility are important intellectual virtues, after all). For a defense against this sort of concern, see William Hare, *In Defence of Open-Mindedness* (Montreal: McGill Queens Press, 1985).

²² See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II.

²³ See e.g. Seider, *Character Compass*, Chs. 4-5, and Lickona and Davidson, *Smart and Good High Schools*, pp. 27-28.

²⁴ See Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind*, pp. 17-22.