

**The Jubilee Centre for  
Character and Virtues**

**In Collaboration with**

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**CHARACTER AND COMMON GOOD**

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Fostering Personal and Social Virtues  
*Character and Common Good*

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It's something of a commonplace that good people can become targets for the bad actions of others. It is a commonplace in part because it has happened a lot in the past and continues to happen. One of the unhappy ways in which our twin ends of education can come apart is just this—a society that shows some signs of flourishing as a society may not embrace its own morally exemplary members.

We may think that Socrates' Athens showed itself a broken political community when it condemned Socrates to death on the grounds that his efforts to educate the youth corrupted the very people that were supposed to be served by his teaching. It's not clear that Socrates thought this. If we take Plato's word for it, Socrates drank the hemlock *as an Athenian*. Small wonder that Plato took pains to provide a way of seeking truth and promulgating wisdom that would not disturb his fellow citizens. For Plato, there was a powerful analogy between a well-ordered community and a well-ordered individual. The more usual source for contemporary work, Aristotle, studied with Plato's Academy for many years, before setting up the Lyceum and taking a position as a tutor to Phillip II of Macedon's son, Alexander. Aristotle urged that a good society was one where the society was actively engaged in helping its citizens develop and exercise virtue. Aristotle's student, Alexander, is best known as a conqueror of vast territories. Athens was small, and the group of Athenians who counted as full citizens was smaller still. Aristotle's lectures were composed for the maturing sons of Athenian citizens. I skate over these points to remind us That thought about virtue, education, and common good come to us all bound up together in the ancient sources for contemporary work.

They stay intertwined but shift significantly when Christian and Muslim thinkers address character education. For all their deep differences Christians and Muslims alike must make room for a kind of thought about character education alien to Aristotle. Neither can hold that one's character is basically set by late adolescence—both are required by the tenets of their faith to hold that even adults can shift their practical orientations fundamentally.<sup>1</sup> Neither can afford to leave women out of the account of the common good, nor treat friendship between men as the sole model of sound sociality.<sup>2</sup> Nor can Muslims and Christians restrict the scope of the community of interest in thought about virtue to a single polis or people. Both Christianity and Islam are sources of profound thought about the human as male *and* female—about sexual difference as a crucial aspect of human life (not *just* because the species reproduces sexually, but also because men and women, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters need to work together across real differences if we are to make any kind of human life that is worth living). As such, both Christians and Muslims are committed to accounts of common good as requiring a kind of friendship that is hard to treat on the Aristotelian model. Relatedly, neither Muslims nor

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<sup>1</sup> For discussion of Aristotle's views on this topic, see Iakovos Vasiliou, "The Role of Good Upbringing in Aristotle's Ethics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (December 1996): 771-797.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of Aristotle's views on friendship, see, e.g. Ann Ward, *Contemplating Friendship in Aristotle's Ethics*, (SUNY Press: Albany, 2016). For discussion of Aquinas's modifications of the Aristotelian view of friendship, see Marko Fuchs, "*Philia* and *Caritas*: Some Aspects of Aquinas's Reception of Aristotle's Theory of Friendship," in Tobias Hoffman, Jörn Müller, and Matthias Perkhams, editors, *Aquinas and the Nicomachean Ethics*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2013), pp. 203-219.

Christians can operate as though the work of nurturing the very young is done offstage and is no proper part of thought about how one should live. And neither Christians nor Muslims can urge that the only kind of flourishing at stake in character development is temporal or worldly health, wealth, and happiness—precisely those goods that lead some critics of virtue theory to insist that cultivation of virtue is a sort of thinly disguised hyper-individualistic exercise that can at best see other human beings as an *occasion* to practice one’s excellence rather than as the whole *point* of working to improve oneself in the first place.

In all these senses, even contemporary *secular* work on character education parts company with Aristotle. The heritage of monotheisms based in fundamental notions of equality and human dignity that direct our attention to goods beyond worldly achievement, are, I think, operating in the background of contemporary work on character education. While, as far as I know, neither Christianity nor Islam has lived up to what I take to be the best aspects of its own intellectual and spiritual traditions, each has provided powerful sources for thinking about how education must be directed to individual flourishing and common good at once. If we are theistically inclined, we can find ways of seeing how these are meant to support each other in these thinkers. I will give brief sketches of two of them.

Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib, ‘Ali, was a cousin, son-in-law and companion of the Prophet Muhammad—the 1<sup>st</sup> Imam for Shia Muslims and the 4<sup>th</sup> Caliph for Sunnis. ‘Ali’s sayings and sermons on virtue provide a picture of virtue in which cultivation and exercise of good character is a lifelong pursuit, the principal focus of education, and necessarily bound up with the common good. ‘Ali was especially alive to compassion as the core of egalitarian social justice. Especially remembered for the social and economic reforms he instituted, he preached on virtue frequently. He developed an account of the unity of the virtues—charity, modesty, temperance, justice, and practical wisdom—as ways in which individuals attend to and honor the presence of God in human life. Piety, that is, was the virtue that unified virtuous activity generally and gave it its direction. The rituals of study and worship provide the immediate context for cultivation of virtue. As far as I know, ‘Ali is one of the very few Muslim thinkers focused on virtue recognized by both Shia and Sunni Muslims as an important source of wisdom on the topic.<sup>3</sup> The proximate community that provides the context for the common good aspect of ‘Ali’s treatment of virtue is the community of believers under his leadership. The larger community is the community of the faithful. And the aspiration is to help that community grow.

For Aquinas, the acquired virtues that are Aristotle’s topic can be rightly classed as political virtues in at least this sense: the cultivation and exercise of these virtues tends to the temporal happiness of individuals and to the smooth, harmonious workings of shared social life. As such, Aristotelian virtues are not divorced from thought about common good for Aquinas, and education aimed at helping the young develop virtue was a principal concern for any sound human society. No proper polis, on this view, can fail to take an interest in the moral education of the young. For all that, Aristotelian virtues remain imperfect virtues in Aquinas’s view. Our highest good is not temporal flourishing. It is beatific union with God in a resurrected life. As such, the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity along with the infused counterparts of acquired cardinal virtues—prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude—are the virtues that direct us to our own highest good. We cannot acquire these virtues under our own steam. At best, we can work not to impede the operation of grace in human life, on the understanding that we are never outside the economy of grace. The infused cardinal virtues are gratuitous, and

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<sup>3</sup> See Tahera Qutbiddin, *A Treasury of Virtues: Sayings, Sermons, and Teachings of ‘Ali*, (New York University Press: New York, 2016).

charity—our participation in God’s love and care for creation—is what unifies them.<sup>4</sup> For Aquinas, the community that forms the setting in which we pursue common good is the City of God—the Church in communion with the Saints. As is true for ‘Ali, nothing will prevent this community from embracing the whole of humanity as we participate in God’s providence. As is true for ‘Ali, the rituals and practices crucial to organized worship provide a training ground for virtue.

Aquinas and ‘Ali both give theologically informed accounts of character education. For both, virtuous activity is simultaneously directed to the common good and the good of individuals. I have suggested that various aspects of Christian and Muslim teachings on virtue part company with Aristotle but that the scope and ambition of theologically informed work on our topic underlies some aspects of contemporary work on character education. We are, for instance, committed to an egalitarian understanding of the ethical possibilities we can nurture in young people. We do not think that the young people we meet in classrooms and in our communities are beyond the reach of the good. We believe that there are higher goods at stake in education than plain intellectual achievements—that we mean to be helping our students be alive to one another, their families, and their communities in some way that transcends the kind of tribalism that we find so often exemplified in public life. In this sense, we are implicitly working to help our students be alive to the demands of a common good that reaches out to individuals and communities remote from the students’ familiar surroundings.

We try to instill in them various kinds of humility that make them better able to acknowledge that the kind of life that is comforting and familiar is not the only good way to live, and that systematic differences in culture and circumstances must be seen in the light of deep human need to pursue the good socially. If I cannot see the kinds of collective work that others do as oriented to human good, I cannot understand others. Understanding is not the same as endorsing, but I am in no position to endorse or oppose a way that generations of my fellow human beings have sought to provide for the good through a mode of social life alien to me if I am unwilling to see the sense of how they live—the way that they are working to address fundamental human needs. More than this, even, the kinds of virtue education that have become familiar through, for example, the last decade of work in the Jubilee Centre, crucially involve an element of self-transcendence that has a dimension that we might call “spiritual,” even though it is embodied in secular learning environments. We ask ourselves and our students to at least consider trying to get over themselves, to recognize the reality of other human beings, and to take seriously their struggles and triumphs, even if these are remote from our own. We advise people to practice gratitude, to engage in the forms of emotional and intellectual formation that jointly help us to grow in wisdom, and so on.

None of the varieties of virtue studied and discussed in mainstream secular work these days can be understood as entirely self-serving, even though it is hard to imagine a good individual life bereft of these aspects of good character. In this sense, although contemporary work on character education tends to take place in an avowedly secular context, it exemplifies something of the spiritual character of theologically informed work.

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<sup>4</sup> For an excellent discussion of the sense in which the infused counterparts of acquired virtues are at stake even in the *Prima secundae* of the *Summa Theologiae* see Robert Miner, “Non-Aristotelian Prudence in the *Prima Secundae*,” *The Thomist*, Vol. 64 (2000): 401-422.