The Necessity of Character

Moral Formation and Leadership in Our Time

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Formation Fast and Slow

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Many of us, I think, at least *aspire* to grow up before we grow old. For this reason, moral development—the whole question of *learning to be good*—has long been a preoccupation of philosophers. But usually—and *ideally*—is the formation of character fast or slow? How do people grow morally? Incrementally and gradually? Or rapidly and spontaneously? In short, should we be expecting a *process* (an unfolding over time) or an *epiphany* (a transformative moment of revelation)? Perhaps, though, things are not so binary. Are both roads to character—the long trail versus the shortcut—found in the course of a normal(ish) life? Or is the *speed* of moral growth ultimately a question of "nature" (i.e., an individual's constitution) versus "nurture" (i.e., the inescapable influence of the environment)?

In philosophy, the question "is formation fast or slow?" can perhaps map onto the question "Plato or Aristotle." Plato believes in epiphanies. He is interested in the irruption of transcendent value in our lives, in moments when we are magnetically attracted to the Good; when strictly *extrinsic* ideals—ideals which emanate from beyond ourselves—nevertheless *break in* upon us. Meanwhile Aristotle arguably remains riveted to the more mundane. Yet while I happen to find Aristotle's ontology, epistemology, and methodology more compelling than Plato's, I *do* nevertheless worry that Aristotle's picture of moral development is too, well, "disenchanted." Aristotle is so wedded to the world that he almost fetishizes the mundane and revels in the essential earthboundedness of our moral trajectory.

Recent cultural and political developments have thrown these concerns about the nature and "speed" of moral development into sharper relief. Over the last hundred years, we have seen extraordinary material progress *vis-à-vis* the key objective predictors of human flourishing. We have seen a drastic reduction in extreme poverty, illiteracy, preventable disease, population growth, and the frequency of serious crime and warfare.[1] Nevertheless, such undeniable progress seems to stand in stark contrast to the epidemic of mental illness affecting young people around the world, whether seen in the explosion of classifiable

pathologies or merely in our widespread sociocultural malaise.[2] Eminent cultural critic David Brooks goes as far as claiming that undergirding "our political dysfunction and the general crisis of our democracy" is the "emotional, relational, and spiritual crisis" in which we're enmeshed.[3] And philosopher Talbot Brewer traces this development to the breakdown of the moral ecology (family, village, community) that Aristotle saw as the essential backdrop for a healthy personal development. The ubiquitous sight of children glued to their screens is a testament to how thoroughly Big Tech has displaced what we used to call the "Village" (it used) to take to raise a child. (The Village has been, for Brewer, "all but shouldered out of its socializing role.")[4] If the moral ecology that Aristotle assumed, in writing for people "brought up in good habits" (1095b4–5),[5] has been largely destroyed, it might be wise to lower our confidence in "mundane" moral education methods and to look elsewhere for enlightenment. Is it time to return to Plato?

Thus far, I have made liberal use of a sociological term—"moral ecology." Let me clarify that I use "moral ecology" in the widest sense to denote the background conditions (societal, cultural, political, institutional, professional) that need to be in place for sustained moral growth to occur. The lack of an appropriate moral ecology creates a moral vacuum that, at the societal level, is simply waiting to be filled by populism and tribalism—or, at an individual level, by snake-oil salesmen or charlatans.

Now, despite Plato's rigorous requirements for a state education, my contention is that Aristotle was more sensitive to the need for a healthy moral ecology. As Aristotle did not believe in second chances for those who've been badly brought up, he was acutely sensitive to the vagaries of what modern philosophers call "moral luck," even to the point of pouring scorn on Plato's conception of the sovereignty of virtue and the idea that no external conditions can retard the development of a good person (1153b19–21).[6] But tending to the conditions from which the proper motivations for moral formation can be caught cannot be done mindlessly. As Brooks puts it, healthy moral ecologies "don't just happen. They have to be seeded and tended."[7] What I want to add is that different roads to character—i.e., different models of growth, different routes to moral maturity—may require different ecologies, which would also need to be "seeded and tended" differentially. Even in the case of moral epiphanies, there may be better or worse ways to lay the foundations for them, although we cannot of course, in a strict sense, "pre-plan the spontaneous," as I'll come to.

If we narrow the exploration of moral ecologies down to the role of *teachers*, drawing on William James's terminology, we can refer to educators who succeed in stimulating "fast" growth—i.e., teachers who facilitate epiphanies—as "ferments."[8] A ferment converts humble carbohydrates to alcohol through a qualitative change. Similarly, a teacher *qua* ferment is more than simply a role model, a mentor, or an "unequal character

friend" in Aristotle's sense (all figures we expect to play key roles in the "slow" formation of students).[9] No, a "ferment teacher" is one who triggers transformation. Brooks remarks dryly that "psychology is a wonderful profession, but its goal is mental health, not moral growth."[10] Yet while this is very much true of academic psychology post-1930s (especially Allport, who effectively banished the study of moral character from psychology),[11] we should recall that William James *preceded* Allport. Back then, psychology still aspired to help people make sense of (and ideally *progress in*) that dimension of their lives we call "moral."

Now epiphanies—to return to those—can be religious, political, aesthetic, romantic, and of many other sorts. The term has the longest association within religion, though, especially as it relates to *conversions*. However, religious conversion *per se* is not the kind of epiphany I am interested in here. My interest is in *moral epiphanies*, particularly epiphanies conducive to moral growth, facilitated (as distinct from paternalistically induced) through educational strategies by a teacher. In what follows, I expand on these themes.

Couched in sociological terms, Aristotle was preoccupied with the impact of different moral ecologies on young people, especially in cases where the ecology is distinctly unpromising. If it systematically involves *Oliver Twist*-like habituation into bad moral traits—"you've got to pick a pocket or two"—or at least a lack of inculcation into positive moral traits, there's not much that can be done about that later in life, at least through methods that require reason-responsiveness. Thus, good arguments alone, Aristotle thinks, cannot undo bad habits (1179b11–31), for a person in such a condition "would not even listen to an argument turning him away, or comprehend it [if he did listen]; and in that state how could he be persuaded to change?"[12] Impoverished moral ecologies compromise, stifle, and stunt. Right from the off, from early childhood, it is vital to cultivate the right kind of habitual responses or character traits (1103b21–5).[13] And while Aristotle does, of course, acknowledge that formation is a lifelong process, he also regards the early years as particularly important. All in all, "no one has even a prospect of becoming good" without proper habituation (1105b11–12),[14] i.e., the inculcation of positive moral habits through what followers of John Dewey later called "learning by doing."

Aristotle seems to envisage two possible ways of becoming virtuous. Plan A is for children lucky enough to have been raised in a decent *polis* by good people—by real grownups, men and women who can actually serve as decent moral exemplars (and children lucky enough, we must add, to have been provided with sufficient material resources). Now, it is *these* kids who are the best candidates for proper moral development, able as they are to

internalize moral habits by imitating what they see modeled—capable, that is, of "catching" virtue. Guided by their mentors, these kids learn to be good step-by-step. As Aristotle insists (1103b1–2), they become just "by doing just actions"; they become brave "by doing brave actions," etc.[15] These kids, as it were, *eat their greens* because they actually like the taste. No one needs to force-feed them broccoli. In other words, they "turn out" virtuous because they *want* to be that. Then, at some stage in late adolescence, these promising apprentices gradually learn to think critically. On their own initiative, they come to revisit their character traits (traits inculcated in them long ago now) and subject those traits to scrutiny. Only then can they reach the destination, which is fully self-chosen virtue guided by the metacognitive capacity Aristotle terms "*phronesis*." At which point, we will have men and women whose actions will at last be internally motivated by the conception *they themselves* have developed of what has now become their second nature (i.e., the virtuous traits of character constitutive of their identity).

Now for Plan B. For the less fortunate kids (kids from, in policy parlance, "chaotic families" or from, in psychological nomenclature, "dysfunctional family-systems"), the road to character will be different. Provided there are still *some* role models left in their lives, these children will certainly develop a *partial* conception of the Good. However, because of the inconsistent ways in which this conception is strengthened, these children might, for instance, struggle to self-regulate. In their most lucid moments, they might concede the value of eating their greens. But the broccoli always gets left on the plate. These kids simply lack the requisite self-control. Either on account of their own perspicuity, or via that of friends and mentors, a significant group might accrue *some* ability to self-regulate—no mean feat, we should add. However, such "continence," in Aristotelian terminology, still falls short of full virtue. For even if these kids manage to self-regulate, it does not come *naturally* to them (i.e., virtue is too much of a struggle to be able to call it, in their case, "second nature"). They eat their greens, but they do not enjoy it. And so they must, in effect, force themselves to be good.

Is Aristotle's account of our earliest years marred by determinism, however? Aristotle does not allow for Damascene epiphanies for students who, *bereft of any role models at all*, cannot even follow Plan B. My apprehensiveness about (and wanting to mitigate against) Aristotle's dispiriting determinism here[16] is why I am drawn again to Plato's picture of moral development. For Plato makes room for the possibility that even if I have *no* exemplars in my life, I might still discover what is morally good as "a reality that transcends [me]," in Iris Murdoch's words, and then "integrate [myself] with it."[17] In other words, because he believes in epiphanies, Plato thinks formation can be *fast*. Plato's world *includes* the strictly catastrophic revelation, the unbidden appearance of the Good in a student's life.

What precisely counts as an epiphany for Plato?[18] Well, an epiphany is an abrupt experience; it constitutes an apocalyptic turning point, whether or not it follows from a real-life encounter with another human being or a profound experience of the natural world. An epiphany is also spontaneous and dramatic, involving the radical reconfiguration of one's intellectual outlook. Next, an epiphany is normally unbidden, supremely fortuitous, and also an experience that is affectively charged. Finally, an epiphany is transformative, resulting in real and positive change in someone's life. In the aftermath of an epiphany, people are not just different; they are *better*, further from floundering and closer to flourishing. (Otherwise, of course, we are in the realm of trauma in which something dreadful instantly induces far-reaching but *negative* change.)

So, does Plato provide a credible account of epiphanic moral growth? Does it supplement Aristotle's account? Is it even compatible with it? To answer these questions fully is beyond the scope of this reflection. The more practical question, perhaps, is whether it is realistic to expect teachers to act as the catalysts of such experiences, to be the "ferments" William James talked about?

Picture a student who desperately needs to change course. Well, perhaps there is a teacher in the mix who cares sufficiently about character, and is sufficiently trusted by the student, to inspire this change. But here, a paradox arises. On one level, it is incumbent on the teacher to create a plan based on precedent. On another level, though, the teacher knows epiphanies are typically fortuitous. Planning the logistics of a spontaneous revelation of the Good seems a contradiction in terms! Plus, we may worry about the ethics of a teacher setting out deliberately to precipitate a student's gestalt shift. It's one thing to accelerate incremental growth that is *taking place anyway;* evicting students from their comfort zones—even when there is a pressing need to do that—is quite another, not least when it risks trauma. A teacher cannot simply watch on, a bemused onlooker surveilling a process she has set in motion. Therefore, even if we endorse a general moral summons to change ourselves, a requirement to change other people radically is a significantly taller order.

Perhaps the closest analogy is that of a psychiatrist considering whether to treat a depressed patient with psychedelics. The overriding moral duty of the doctor, of course, is "first not to harm," and the causal link between psychedelics and depression is still largely opaque. But let's say there's a doctor who has some experience of seeing psychedelics working (causing harm in a vanishingly few number of cases) in the clinical practice of other doctors whom she trusts. Would we not be inclined to say that the potential benefits

might outweigh the risks and that she should go for it? The role of a teacher cannot be compared with that of a psychiatrist, obviously, so this analogy only works up to a point. However, my own experience as a high-school teacher and later as a university professor has taught me that the true "ferment" teacher will need to have radical strategies in her arsenal, such as the extreme methods of physical and psychological endurance often witnessed in boot camps for army recruits or radical engagements with nature at its wildest. Aristotelian methods work well with the majority of students, but there may come a time when a dose of Plato is needed.[19]

Endnotes

1. Hans Rosling, Ola Rosling, and Anna Rosling Rönnlund, *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong about the World—and Why Things Are Better than You Think* (London: Sceptre, 2018).
2. Cf. Shane McLoughlin and Kristján Kristjánsson, "Virtues as Protective Factors for Adolescent Mental Health," *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, in press, https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.13004.
3. David Brooks, "How America Got Mean," *Atlantic*, September 2023, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/09/us-culture-moral-education-formation/674765/.
4. Talbot Brewer, "The Great Malformation," *The Hedgehog Review*, Summer 2023, https://hedgehogreview.com/issues/theological-variations/articles/the-great-malformation. Reprinted elsewhere in this volume.
5. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1985), 6.
6. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 203.
7. Brooks, "How America Got Mean."
8. William James, "Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment," *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1880, 441–59.
9. Kristján Kristjánsson, *Friendship for Virtue* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2022), chap. 5.
10. Brooks, "How America Got Mean."
11. Gordon W. Allport, *Personality: A Psychological Interpretation* (New York: Holt, 1937).
12. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 292.
13. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 35.
14. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 40.
15. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 34.
16. See, e.g., Kristján Kristjánsson, *Flourishing as the Aim of Education: An Aristotelian View* (London: Routledge, 2020), chaps. 5–6; Mark E. Jonas and Yoshiaki Nakazawa, *A Platonic Theory of Moral Education: Cultivating Virtue in Contemporary Democratic Classrooms* (London: Routledge, 2021).
17. Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), 70.
18. See further in Kristjánsson, *Flourishing as the Aim of Education: An Aristotelian View*, chap. 6. Cf. Sophie Grace Chappell, *Epiphanies* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2022).
19. I am grateful to James Mumford for extended comments on an earlier draft.

"Moral formation" can sound unacceptably paternalistic and insufferably moralistic. But if virtue has something to do with our flourishing as human beings, if the content of our character is connected to our ability to "make a success of life," then moral formation is what we owe the rising generation.

This landmark volume brings together a series of original and penetrating essays by educators, scholars, leaders, policymakers, and political commentators convinced of the necessity of character in our cultural and political moment.

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