The Necessity of Character

Moral Formation and Leadership in Our Time

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To Fulfill Our Human Promise: The Aristotelian Picture

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Making student success the be-all and the end-all of education has induced an ever-increasing anxiety. Our schools and colleges have been shaped by the idea that our primary purpose as human beings is to produce and consume in the market and that the measure of our success in doing so is *profitability*—assessed, in the case of an individual, by his or her wealth and status.

Such an account of what human beings are *for* is reductive and uninspiring. For Aristotle, by contrast, the point of human life is *flourishing* (*eudaimonia* in Greek). And although Aristotle concedes that you need a measure of health and wealth to flourish, the fourth-century BCE Athenian philosopher refuses to equate flourishing with profitability. Rather, flourishing for Aristotle means living a fully human and wholly humane life. As such, flourishing has an inescapably moral dimension. An Aristotelian definition of flourishing is certainly not value neutral.[1] Flourishing is a dynamic, not static, condition. Flourishing involves the progressive development of capacities and strengths over a lifespan. We are shaped to live a certain way by observing others and by acting ourselves in ways we want to become habitual. To be virtuous requires a certain kind of preparation or practice—which we call formation.

But what is it that enables an individual—what is *needed*—to flourish as an individual? Aristotle thinks we need the virtues. Virtues are positive character traits or dispositions that enable individuals to act in an authentically human way—in a way "becoming" a human being—consistently and willingly. And because Aristotle also believes the seeds of virtue to be innate, part of every human being's nature, there's a way in which becoming virtuous is synonymous with realizing an individual's potential. Aristotle's theory is *teleological* (*telos* being the Greek word for *purpose*, *end*, or *goal*). All living things *aim* at something. An eye is meant for seeing. An acorn is meant to be a tree. And a human being is meant to be generous, courageous, perceptive, and restrained. To have character, then,

is to fulfill your promise as a person. Aristotle says every rational being must have an end. What is ours, we might ask? With that question commences our quest for our *raison d'être*.

Now, if we find compelling Aristotle's account of what human beings are *for* (or at least more compelling than the anxiety-inducing, reductive market-oriented alternative), then we also need to think differently about *education*. Aristotle helps us to see that education is not primarily about teachers relaying information but effecting transformation—though a transformation that takes time, that happens incrementally, that requires intentional practice. And if Aristotle is right, the test of an effective education should not just be what a student *knows*—the data he or she's able to dredge up in an exam—but who the student has *become*. Thus, the aim of educators is to help students prepare to lead worthy, worthwhile lives—to help them set the right direction for themselves, find purpose, locate meaning, make certain commitments. One way to encapsulate the ancient Aristotelian idea of a virtuous character is someone who wants to do what is right.

Indeed, formation takes place when a person belongs to a community. We cannot, that is, achieve our potential in isolation. Our flourishing cannot be divorced from that of our community. We are rational and ethical beings, certainly. We are also social and political beings. Solipsistic or individualistic approaches to ethical thinking miss out key components of our *telos.* To "take [our] life," as William Shakespeare puts it in the prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*, requires being in relationship. Our relationships contribute to the common good; conversely, my individual well-being depends on the common good, and the good is dependent on the common good of all. The common good is not, as libertarians sometimes fear, about eroding individuality or suppressing disagreement. It's about recognizing the indispensability of social bonds for the flourishing of every citizen as well as, we might add, the importance of citizens coming together to deliberate about what constitutes a just society or, indeed, a good life—which is how "collective wisdom" incrementally accumulates.

Over and above the material "externals" we need to live (our physical needs), in order to flourish, people require a degree of self-esteem, to be permitted a degree of agency and space to play, to think, to express themselves, to protest, to engage in political life, to access information, to be included, to grow, to belong, to be optimistic, to reproduce, and, above all, to be empowered to discover a sense of purpose and meaning in life. Furthermore, making a success of life is not always something measurable in the way that some physical needs are (like the daily calorie intake one needs to survive). We are also emotional, intellectual, and spiritual beings—dimensions stubbornly resistant to quantification. Nor is flourishing the same as survival. Formally put, survival—what Baruch Spinoza called "persistence in being,"[2] continuing to live despite challenging circumstances—is a necessary but not sufficient condition of flourishing. Flourishing, though, exceeds this, involving

as it does goods such as life satisfaction, character, virtue, close social relationships, fulfillment in work and personal life, pleasure, agency, maturation. Flourishing connotes something more like "optimal well-being"—which is ultimately what we're all after, isn't it?

Douglas B. Rasmussen says, "The existence of a human *telos* need not conflict with the individualized character of human flourishing."[3] Human flourishing is found in the way we live our lives—it is found in action and consists of activities that are self-directed. This self-direction is open to diverse forms of human flourishing and manifests itself in unique ways because flourishing is not separate from the unique lives of individual human persons. Human flourishing implies the individuality of each human person. Nevertheless, flourishing is a life led exercising the virtues, and these same virtues define what gives our lives purpose. Human flourishing is, therefore, the ability and potential to have a good life. This Aristotelian teleological explanation of flourishing is ordered to an end—even if the end is perceived by critics, who do not subscribe to Aristotle's ontological and epistemological realism,[4] as "unknowable."

Practical wisdom (*phronesis*) is the overarching virtue that integrates all the elements critical to the flourishing life. *Phronesis*, as defined by Aristotle, is the intellectual metavirtue that helps a moral agent to integrate and adjudicate the (sometimes) conflicting messages emanating from different moral, civic, and performative virtues—for example, the conflict between being simultaneously loyal and honest that often arises in the lived experiences of children, soldiers, and politicians. Yet, while *phronesis* encompasses a variety of functions (employing reason to regulate one's emotional life or cultivating one's own blueprint of the good life or "moral identity" or suspending a virtue, even, in the case of a values conflict), what seems clear is that *phronesis*-guided ethics education needs to begin with the first function mentioned above, which we could refer to as moral sensitivity: the ability to identify the ethical issues at stake. A great deal of this initial educative work simply involves *virtue literacy*: the ability to spot virtues and vices, name them, and apply them to one's own domains of experience.[5] According to Aristotelian character developmental theory, young people who have acquired the right moral traits through habituation and role modeling need gradually to develop the intellectual virtue of *phronesis* to guide their decision-making. Otherwise, their moral lives will be fragmented, uncritical, and lacking coherence. In that sense, then, *phronesis* is best understood as excellence in ethical decision-making.[6]

To be successful, any Aristotelian program of character education needs to satisfy four criteria. It must: (1) speak to the dominant anxieties of the given context, (2) ideally meet with a relatively broad political consensus, but only in the sense of doing the right thing, (3) be underpinned by a respectable philosophical theory, providing it with a stable methodological, epistemological, and moral basis, and (4) be supported by a plausible psychological

theory, explaining how the ideals of the educational theory fit into actual human psychology and are generally attainable. These criteria must not become like a shopping cart that everyone can fill with his or her random choice of goods. The variables in the definition will have to be populated with sufficient specificity to prevent the account of flourishing from becoming malleable.

Finally, character education affords the opportunity—it creates the space—for virtue to be caught, taught, and sought. "Character sought" involves the *phronesis*-related desire to discern and freely pursue one's own self-development. It involves reflection and ultimately establishing and *owning* one's own character commitments—that is, commitments to something worthwhile. "Character sought" is more likely to become operational as the student matures, but it can be introduced and guided by the teacher at an earlier age. The aims of "character sought" include making and exercising commitments that set the right direction for life.[7] It brings purpose and meaning to actions undertaken and firms up decisions to act virtuously. It involves being faithful to relationships as well as strengthening integrity. It commits to the virtues as a course of action and seeks out and consciously cultivates practical wisdom (*phronesis*).

Many of us recognize the impact formal education has on human flourishing, but we often overlook the forces at work in our society that shape our conception of the good life. Our understanding of flourishing, we forget, is formed as much by the culture we live in as the classrooms we learn in. This oversight, understandable as it may be, impacts our ability to think clearly about flourishing because it keeps us from seeing the foundations upon which our idea of the good life is built. Lacking a sense of where our self-understanding comes from, we lack the language needed to interrogate that understanding critically and assess its value honestly.

Endnotes

1. James Arthur, *The Formation of Character in Education: From Aristotle to the 21st Century* (London: Routledge, 2019).
2. See Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes, rev. ed. (London: George Bell & Sons, 1901), 2:136, https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/elwes-the-chief-works-of-benedict-de-spinoza-vol-2.
3. Douglas B. Rasmussen, "Human Flourishing and the Appeal to Human Nature," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 16, no. 1 (1999), 34.
4. Andrew Peterson and Kristján Kristjánsson, "The Philosophical Foundations of Character Virtue Development," in *The Routledge International Handbook of Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Character Development*, ed. Michael D. Matthews and Richard M. Lerner (London: Routledge, 2024), 1:257–84.
5. James Arthur et al., *Knightly Virtues: Enhancing Virtue Literacy Through Stories* (Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham, 2014), http://epapers.bham.ac.uk/1946/1/KnightlyVirtuesReport.pdf; see also Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, *A Framework for Character Education in Schools* (2013; repr. Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham, 2022), https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Framework-for-Character-Education.pdf.
6. Kristján Kristjánsson and Blaine Fowers, *Phronesis: Retrieving Practical Wisdom in Psychology, Philosophy, and Education* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2024); Kristján Kristjánsson, *Flourishing as the Aim of Education: A Neo-Aristotelian View* (London: Routledge, 2020).
7. Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, *A Framework for Character Education in Schools*, 11, 15.

"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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