A sociological imagination of virtue ethics: is symbiosis possible?

Sandra Cooke and Pete Alcock

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Abstract

Virtue Ethics focuses largely on the character of the individual, how virtues are developed and applied. Social Sciences, (specifically Sociology and Social Policy), seek to explain the world, society and how individuals relate to their social world. The two disciplines have more to say to one another than first glance might suggest: both are interested in justice and fairness, both seek to improve peoples' lives and both believe in the concept of a better world. There *should* be a close relationship between the two yet, as Sayer argues, too often we suffer from disciplinary parochial behaviour that prevents truly interdisciplinary engagement. Too often the social context of people's actions are downplayed as the intricacies of virtue ethics are unpicked and too often social explanations downplay the part individuals play in destructive behaviours.

Aristotle had plenty to say about the social world and its order, but perhaps because that world was so unimaginably different to modern society, amid talk of natural inequality between slaves and masters, it is sometimes hard to understand how lessons from such a society apply to modern times, and avoiding engagement with such issues rather than seeking wisdom from outside the confines of virtue ethics is maybe the safer option. In this paper we seek to explore how such engagement might help both virtue ethicists and social scientists to better understand how we create the social conditions for flourishing. We do so by asking how applying a *sociological imagination* helps us to understand virtue in such a way that we improve not only ourselves but the world we live in. The sociological imagination seeks to integrate social, biographical and historical versions of phenomena to help construct a grounded concept of what is really going on. Theoretically, we use the idea of structure and agency; practically, we draw upon findings from the recent empirical study of Virtues in the Profession of Teaching.

We ask what the findings from this study tell us about how potentially virtuous agents are bounded by social structures and how these support or constrain active agency for the good. Teachers described the social and political contexts within which they work and offer vivid accounts of the challenges these generate. Yet too often in media debate the focus is either on the failings of individuals with insufficient reference to the context, or the blame is put upon the context as if the individual played no part in the failings. Both extremes are, of course, wrong most of the time, and it is our contention in this paper that virtue ethics may be strengthened by greater attention to social science and that social scientists should not be afraid to engage with the language of virtue.

This paper explores the potential symbiosis between social science analysis and the practice of virtue ethics. We are social scientists, operating within a critical realist paradigm. We believe that social science provides the intellectual basis for analysing the social world, and through that analysis a guide to ways to change that world for the good. In the early part of this paper we will examine the key features of this paradigm and outline why, and how, we believe it provides a framework for social change. However, as will become clear, our understanding of social science has at its core the active role of agents as the creators, and recreators, of social structures, together with the recognition of the normative dimension of values in informing, and underpinning, the activities of agents. It is this commitment to a normative interpretation of social science which we believe provides the basis for the symbiosis that we suggest may be possible with virtue ethics. In the later part of the paper we draw upon research examining virtues in the education and practice of teachers to demonstrate how this symbiosis can be applied to an understanding of the role of, and scope for, virtue ethics in teaching practice.

The sociological imagination

"There is no way in which any social scientist can avoid assuming choices of values and implying them in his work as a whole" (Wright Mills, 1959, 2000, p.177).

The point about the centrality of values to social science was made tellingly by C Wright Mills in his book *The Sociological Imagination* over fifty years ago. Wright Mills has been quoted as an inspiration by many social scientists, and in preparing for this paper we began by revisiting his classic guide to social scientific analysis. Wright Mills was Professor of Sociology at Columbia University in New York. He died at the relatively young age of 45 shortly after the publication of The Sociological Imagination, after a decade in which he had produced a number of influential books on American society offering a radical challenge to much of the then social science establishment in the US. His work anticipated, and informed, the radical challenges to establishment thinking, and politics, in the 1960s and 1970s – indeed looking back it is still hard to believe that it was written before all that academic and cultural upheaval. However, his understanding of the role and practice of social science has a much more timeless reach; and the key elements of his analysis, and his exhortation to practice these, remain strikingly relevant in the (perhaps not so) different world of early twenty-first century post-industrial society.

First and foremost Wright Mills wanted to promote social science, of which sociology was only one part, albeit a critical one. Social science was important, he argued, because it brought together the

private worlds of individuals (what we might call agents) and the public worlds of social relations (structure). He talked about these as 'personal troubles' and 'public issues'. The job of social scientists was to show how these were, in fact, different sides of the same coin; and the means for doing this was the exercise of the sociological imagination. "The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society." (ibid, p.6).

Whilst promoting social science, Wright Mills was highly critical of much of what then dominated the field. He was quite clear about what he thought social science could not, or should not, be. It was not 'grand theory' – the attempt to develop a theoretical model of how society is constructed and reproduced from which the role and functions of all its constituent parts could be deduced. Here he was particularly critical of the leading social theorist of the time, Talcott Parsons, who had developed a structural functionalist analysis of society as a social system maintained by the socialization and social control of its members. Wright Mills did not believe that grand theories (or meta-narratives as we would now call them) could capture all the complexity and, more importantly the conflicts, of modern societies, and that in the light of any focused empirical study they would quickly begin to unravel.

He was equally sceptical, however, of narrow empiricism, and the belief, informed to some extent by natural science methods, that social relations and social structures could only constructed through inductive analysis from robust empirical data. Social science requires us to study social facts, but the facts that we study should be determined by the questions that we ask of them not by the availability of data alone. Wright Mills would no doubt have been critical of much of the practice of economists and 'big data' analysts today, who first look for reliable data, and then seek to discover what questions it may be able to help us answer. For him it was the questions that we asked that should drive the work of social scientists, and empirical data was only of value as a means to validate or illuminate these.

Finally Wright Mills was also critical of what he referred to as 'bureaucratic research', where the focus of study and the questions to be analysed were determined in advance by bureaucrats, or policy makers, who in practice of course may also be providing the funding for the research to be conducted. Applied policy research has become an ever more popular, and ever more extensive, feature of social science since the middle of the last century, and it is not all necessarily mindlessly, or blindly, bureaucratic. But the setting of the research questions by those who may have vested

interests in the answers to them is an ever continuing threat to the autonomy and the criticality of social science (as many of us who have undertaken such work have sometimes found).

It was the social scientist who should be setting the research questions, according to Wright Mills; and this was just what the exercise of the sociological imagination should enable her to do. These do not come from grand theory, or from raw social data; nor should they be set by those in power who are looking for particular answers (Wright Mills, 1956, had earlier written about the influence of *The Power Elite* on US society). Rather they come from independent critical enquiry, which is theoretically informed and empirically grounded, but is also based upon clear and transparent social values. This was, for our purposes at least, Wright Mills' most important contribution to social science – his belief that in studying what *is* we must also be asking what *ought to be*, and from this his plea for a normative approach to social enquiry, based in his case upon radical values that challenged some of the presumptions of powerful interests, as the quote above reminds us.

Structure and agency

For Wright Mills the purpose of the sociological imagination was to bring together private troubles and public issues in understanding how social relations were, and should be, conducted. Since then social scientists have developed further this dualism at the heart of our understanding of these relations. More commonly this is now discussed as the contrast between the roles of structure and agency in determining social outcomes. Social scientists know that social structures shape the relations that all of us engage in as social beings. From the 'hard' structures of rules and regulations to the 'softer' structures of institutional values and cultures, our actions are constrained by the social contexts within which they take place.

At the same time, however, we recognise that individual actors have choices about how (and whether) to act within these structural constraints – and, more generally of course, that these social structures are themselves the products of the cumulative and collective actions of those operating within them. As Karl Marx pointed out back in 1852, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please… but under circumstances… given and transmitted from the past." Critical social science research and analysis must therefore be based upon both structure and agency.

This requires us to develop an empirical understanding of social context, recognising that this is always a multi-layered and complex picture, as we shall discuss in a little more detail below in the

context of teaching in schools. It also requires us to examine the actions and choices of individual agents, and in particular how what people do is shaped by the ideas, ideals and values that they hold. Most significantly analysis must address the inter-relationship between structure and agency – how, in practice, the actions of agents operate to produce social outcomes, and to reproduce the structures which surround these.

Analysis of the inter-relationship between structure and agency was developed in particular by one of the UK's most prominent social scientists Anthony Giddens in what he called structuration theory (Giddens, 1976). Like Wright Mills, Giddens' commitment to structuration was based on a rejection of the meta-narratives of functionalism and interpretivism or phenomenology. He believed that there was a real social world that we could study, but that knowledge of that world could not be derived from theories of its structure alone. Rather we must study the actions of agents, who are reflective but operate within generalizable rules of procedure, and the consequences of these actions – both intended and unintended. For it is through these actions, and their ensuing social outcomes, that social structures are created and recreated. As he put it in one of his discussions of structuration, "Society only has form, and that form only has effects on people, in so far as structure is produced and reproduced in what people do" (Giddens and Pierson, 1998, p.77).

For Giddens, therefore, agents can innovate and they can transform the social world, but in this they are constrained by the contexts in which they find themselves. Our understanding of how individual agents negotiate this relationship in practice, and how their social circumstances operate to shape their social lives has been informed in particular by the work of the French social scientist Pierre Bourdieu.

Bourdieu himself drew on a Weberian approach to social analysis which assumed that social structures are stratified into different social classes and groups, as a result of the broader social and economic forces within society. Hence the practices of individuals will in part be a product of their position within these structures, and the capabilities and resources that they have been able to derive from these. The position of agents within this context he referred to as their 'habitus'. Habitus was not for Bourdieu a conscious state, but was rather the aggregated embodiment of the background and experience of agents as individuals, and of the different forms of capital which they held (Bourdieu, 1977). For Bourdieu capital included not only economic and financial resources but also social capital (in the form of social networks, with the benefits they endow upon the individual as a result of association), and cultural capital (educational knowledge and qualifications, cultural

experience, and social skills such as language and manners). Of particular importance to this debate, however, is the extent to which Bourdieu's theory allows for individuals to change, or resist, the structures that shape their habitus. Bourdieu has sometimes been accused of structural determinism, allowing either the possibility that individuals deny responsibility for their actions and beliefs, or consigning them to a role as helpless victims. But there is a different reading which, while recognising that individuals do not consciously create their habitus, argues that habitus can, and does, change in response to specific circumstances (see Yang Yang, 2013).

Habitus is not fixed, therefore; but it is what agents bring to their social interactions. And these interactions take place, Bourdieu argued, within different social fields where (particularly power) relations are played out - and structures are shaped and reshaped. Operating within these fields, agents acquire a 'feel for the game' as they pursue their social interests, and in this they draw on the capitals that they embody (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). For some, therefore, greater capital, in its various forms, will be likely to lead to more effective and beneficial social exchange, and thus for some, change or the possibility of agency will come more easily than for others (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

The power elite identified by Wright Mills will be likely to have a more significant influence in some important social fields than many other, less well-resourced, agents. Bourdieu referred to this as the exercise of 'symbolic violence' (Jenkins, 1992) – the ability of those with large capital holdings to create an appearance of normality around the social structures that support and protect their exercise of power. We know that social structures are not equal, and the analysis of the acquisition and use of different forms of capital helps us to understand how this inequality is produced and reproduced.

However, a focus on the (undue) influence of powerful social agents should not lead us to ignore the more general point that Bourdieu was making about the ability (and the responsibility) of all actors to negotiate their relations (or dispositions as he sometimes called this) within the fields in which they operated. In doing this he argued that all need to develop a practical wisdom (or phronesis) to guide their actions. Thus whilst some social agents will be less powerful and influential than others (and indeed through their habitus may come to accept those limitations on their social outcomes), all are active within certain social fields, and through their actions will transform these fields, even if only marginally. All social agents therefore have a responsibility to reflect on the ideas, ideals and

values that they bring to their social actions, and to develop the practical wisdom that will help them to actualise these.

Social science and virtue ethics

It is our contention, therefore, that social science provides us with an extensive and sophisticated framework for understanding how, and why, agents act; what the intended and unintended consequences of these actions are; what the social outcomes are that flow from these; and how these social outcomes act to create and to perpetuate the social structures that exist within different social fields. Social structures, including the institutions and practices within them, are the product of the ongoing informed, intended and unintended actions of social agents. Although not all social agents approach these actions from an equal standpoint (or habitus) - or, in Orwell's infamous words, the dispositions of some actors are 'more equal than others'.

The different disciplines within the social sciences have developed their specific focus on different aspects of these social interactions. Political scientists examine the ideologies and practices of politicians and those who seek to use power and influence within leading social institutions to change the world. Economists apply formulae (sometimes complex mathematical ones) to data on economic performance to explain how this has been achieved, and to predict how it will develop in the future. Psychologists analyse how individual physical and social development affects the ability of human agents to act socially. Sociologists analyse the structural contexts that constrain agency and the ways in which the activities of agents operate to transform these. Social Policy, where we work, seeks to use analysis of the outcomes of current social interactions to create an informed moral case for future reform.

All social scientists share Wright Mills' sociological imagination, however - even if they are not aware of it. Although their focus is on the different dimensions of social interaction, all are in practice concerned with how agency and structure interact to produce social change. Further, as we have argued above, agents acting in this process are motivated by ideas and values. They seek to create the world as they want it to be, as far as possible; and, in our analysis of their actions and the outcomes of these, we are judging them against these ideals. Social science is therefore intrinsically a normative enterprise.

Sayer (2011) has developed this normative dimension of social science in much more detail, exploring (as the title of his book captures) *Why Things Matter to People*. As Sayer explains the

actions of agents are not value free or value neutral. They are motivated by their concerns about the world in which they live – what Wright Mills called 'private troubles'. However, these concerns are contended by other actors. It is this contention over the aims and the outcomes of the actions of social agents that is at the heart of the normative dimension of social science; and social scientists must engage with this normative debate if they are to understand how and why social relations are to continue to change and develop. Again, as Wright Mills argued, the research questions that social scientists analyse must always be normative, concerned not only with what is, but what ought to be.

This is where our concerns as social scientists come to engage with the debates and practices of virtue ethics. The focus of virtue ethics is on the motivations behind social actions, and in particular the ethical and value base that informs these – or rather informs the agents who undertake these actions. It is concerned not only with the values that inform agents, but also with what these values should be and how agents can employ them to improve the social world through their actions within it – or within the fields in which they engage. Virtue ethics is driven by a normative concern to make the world a better place, and recognises that this can only be achieved through the (informed and effective) actions of agents in producing and reproducing it.

This is, in Aristotelian terms, a eudaimonic concern, focused on how to promote human flourishing through ethically informed social actions. And it is something that most of the other participants in this conference know much more about that we can claim to. However, it has been the basis upon which the research which we now go to discuss has been conceived and developed. The research was focused on the values and the practices of teachers and trainee teachers in the UK educational system. In particular it sought to explore the extent to which teachers saw virtue ethics as an essential part of their professional training and their practice in schools, and sought to begin to demonstrate how a social scientific analysis of the contexts (or fields) in which these teachers were operating would help us to understand their potential to operationalise virtue ethics to achieve desirable social changes within these.

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues research

A key conviction of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues is to have a robust and rigorous research and evidence-based approach to the analysis and practice of virtue ethics. It seeks to connect social science research and analysis to the practice of developing good character and virtues and the benefits these bring to individuals and society, starting from within a broadly Aristotelian perspective. One element of this work has been a study of the place of virtues in professional

practice; and in this paper we focus on the research concerning the practice of teachers and teaching. The study included teachers across three career stages (entering professional education, entering the workplace post-qualification, and those who had more than five years of experience in schools) from five universities and ten secondary schools across England and Scotland. The main focus of the research was to understand how teachers conceptualise virtues in relation to teaching and to explore the place of virtues in teaching practice. Questionnaires were completed by 546 teachers and semi-structured interviews conducted with 95 respondents, selected purposefully from those who volunteered in the questionnaire to be interviewed.

The questionnaires contained five sections:

- ranking of respondents' personal top six character strengths from the 24 named by Peterson and Seligman (Peterson and Seligman, 2004),
- ranking the top six character strengths, from the same list, that the 'ideal' teacher might hold,
- responses to six ethical dilemmas,
- questions (15) on the work or study environment,
- basic demographic data.

The interviews were designed to cover similar questions, in much greater detail, to offer a more nuanced understanding than an online questionnaire could provide. More details about this work will be published in the report from the project later in 2015 (Arthur, *et. al.,* forthcoming). Our intention in this paper is to explain how applying a sociological imagination, alongside a virtue ethical approach, to this data might help us to develop a better understanding of the constraints and enablers teachers face when seeking to develop virtuous practice. To do so, we first summarise some of the results of the study and use these to illustrate our argument.

Conceptions of the good teacher

Respondents were asked to choose the six character strengths they felt best described the ideal teacher, and to describe in free form a teacher who had embodied those strengths. Alongside this, they were asked to describe why they had chosen teaching as a career. These were combined to provide an interpretation of how teachers at different career stages conceptualise the good teacher. The dominant theme in responses to what motivated people to enter teaching was a combination of altruistic and intrinsic motivations: altruistic in the sense of wanting to make a difference to young people's lives, and intrinsic in relation to their own love of subject or enjoyment in working with young people.

There were subtle differences in the character strengths respondents described themselves as holding and those required for the ideal teacher. Specifically, they reported themselves as holding kindness and honesty in their top six personal strengths, but in their descriptions of the ideal teacher these two were replaced with leadership and perseverance. Thus, we suggest that people choose teaching for what might be called 'good' (as in virtuous) reasons, and hold themselves to be kind and honest, but recognise that to be a good teacher in today's education world, one perhaps needs performance virtues of leadership and perseverance over the moral virtues of kindness and honesty. This immediately begs the question of how the conceptualisation of the good teacher differs between the personal and the professional in practice, and why this matters.

Virtues in teaching practice

In the dilemmas section of the questionnaire, the courses of action suggested, together with the reasons for choosing those courses of actions, allowed an opportunity to explore the place of virtues, rules and possible consequences in ethical decision making in teaching. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a key finding in the study was that reliance on rules-based reasoning appeared to diminish with experience in the field, although there were some notable exceptions, in what we term 'high-stakes' situations. For example, in a dilemma which concerned assessment processes all teachers appeared to revert to rules-based reasoning; and for experienced teachers in particular, in situations concerning potential conflict with colleagues, teachers may choose to use rules where these could help to protect important relationships.

Working environments and organisational structures

In responses to the questionnaire and interviews, teachers described what helped, or hindered, their ability to exercise virtue in practice, or to be the kind of teacher they wanted to be. Three themes emerged through the data: the extent to which their school allowed them to feel supported and motivated in practice, the emotional attachment they felt to their work, and the pressures of time and workload they encountered. And these were linked to different dimensions of the broader contexts within which they were working.

For instance, some teachers described supportive leadership, allowing for professional discretion in the classroom, while others pointed to more controlling environments with more prescribed expectations. Many made references to aspects of government policies, both in changing expectations and in determining priorities to demonstrate performance within school. There were

also concerns about the environment and family lives of pupils, which inevitably impinged on what teachers could expect within their classrooms.

This is an inevitably brief summary of some of the important findings from the research on teachers' understanding and experience of how the conditions for virtuous practice in teaching might be developed. We now examine how a theoretical analysis of those conditions helps us to make sense of our research, and in doing so we draw further on exemplar quotes from the interviews with experienced teachers in the study.

Macro, meso and micro structures

The structural constraints within which teachers practices are, of course, extensive and complex; and our research did not in itself seek to explore these in detail – that would be the subject of a quite different enterprise. However, it was clear from the experiences of our respondents in the survey and the interviews that for them structural constraints did matter, and were linked to their ability to act as virtuous agents. Social scientists sometimes aim to reduce the complexity of structural contexts by separating them into different levels of abstraction: macro (socio-economic and demographic context), meso (policy and practice fields) and micro (local circumstances and relationships). We have sought to capture these, and their relationships to each other in Figure 1; and we explore their importance for our understanding of the practices and experiences of our teachers below.

Macro-level influences:
dominant idealogies,
economic policies, national
wealth

Meso-level influences:
educational policies,
national curriculum,
standards

Micro-level influences:
what happens in the
classroom, parental and
pupil expectations

Within the self: embodied
conceptions of the 'good'
teacher

Figure 1

Macro-level structures set the context within which all social agents act. We are all constrained or advantaged by the broader socio-economic structures of the country in which we live, and indeed beyond. In education, the extent to which countries can afford universal provision shapes how they fulfil their obligations to fulfil what are now rights to education enshrined in international law. Dominant ideological beliefs may determine who should benefit from education, most obviously seen in areas where particular groups are denied access, such as women under the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Similarly, ideologies will shape the broader political economy of societies, such as free-market liberalism seen in many Western economies, which informs an ethos of competition that in turn influences policy on issues such as welfare provision and the distribution of wealth. Within these structures there is also social mobility, as people move up or down social hierarchies. Education has a particularly important role to play here as a driver for social mobility, and so access to, and benefit from, education is important in recreating these structural constraints.

Teachers often comment on the importance that family support and financial resources can have on the participation and achievement of pupils in school, and there has been growing evidence of the

influence of early years' home environment on children's progression in schools, leading some to argue that even if schools want to counter social disadvantage through education, they are unable to do so (Smith, 2012). In our research a number of respondents were aware that these broader factors did affect their practice and their achievements, for example, in one interview these experienced teachers described the advantages they observed amongst more affluent school populations:

> You don't quite get the discipline battles that you might have in a, say, a really tough inner city school, so you can focus a lot more on the subject and I guess the pupils are a little bit more motivated, possibly because, you know, the parents are under pressure (01 Experienced Teacher).

> Top end children, I'm not talking top end set one, I'm talking children who come from very nice backgrounds, where they have both parents, they have their own bedroom, they have a garden, they have a computer, they eat three times a day and they normally belong to a club, they sometimes play a musical instrument, they will pick that up by the way they live. (06 Experienced Teacher).

However, it is meso-level structures that perhaps most obviously shape the working environment and therefore practices of teachers in schools, and with which our respondents, like most other teachers, were most concerned. Educational policy does not just drive the type and structure of schools, it has also increasingly been concerned to govern, and to monitor, what happens within them. This includes most obviously the setting of the national curriculum; but it also extends to the use of a range of measures to assess aspects of educational achievement, driven in large part by the performance culture of New Public Management (Pollitt, 1990; Flynn, 2012). This includes performance in Standardised Assessment Tests (SATs) in both primary and secondary education; and in secondary education comparisons of examination results against national averages or against the nominal standards proposed by successive governments - in the UK five A*-C grades at GCSE, later modified to five A*-C grades including Maths and English. As schools in the UK and the USA have sought to defend their survival in an increasingly market-driven environment, schools and teachers have inevitably had to respond to these meso-level policy constraints (Ball, 2003; Barrett, 2009). In our research a number of respondents commented on the impact of this performance culture on their work:

I think the overriding thing is that I'm an English teacher and it's completely and utterly driven by political machinations and exam results, that the inspirational love of literature and all of that side of things is all but gone from my job, really. We are all about preparing young people for exams from the day they walk through the door and not much else, so Government, Ofsted and the drive for exam results are the most negative bits of the profession, I would say (02 Experienced Teacher).

It's become so data led, your professional judgement and then on your performance management, it's written down, even if you get, if your target was 100% A* to C and you got 97% A* to C, which is still sort of 30 or 40% above the national average, it's target not met and it's, well, it's not exactly inspirational... (20 Experienced Teacher).

The worst thing of all is this constant thing of, well, because Ofsted are coming, we should teach this way, so doesn't matter what you've been doing for the last 'n' years, Ofsted are coming, Ofsted want you to teach this particular way of doing things and that has been, probably Ofsted has been the biggest hindrance on teacher development in the last 10 years (19 Experienced Teacher).

Whilst teachers may be most aware ideologically of the influence of meso-level policies in shaping their practices within schools, it is probably the micro-level structures that they work within that more directly affect their day-to-day (or minute-to-minute) activities as agents in schools (Sanger, 2012). These include the size of and physical resources in the rooms in which they work, the support (or not) of assistants or other professionals in the school, the expectations (and the moods) of pupils, and the behaviour within the classroom. The nature of classroom practice means that decisions are multiple and taken in the heat of the moment; for example, Jackson (1986) has estimated that a teacher will make between 200 and 300 professional interactions in the course of a working day.

For our respondents this micro-level constraint was a critical factor in their perceptions of their ability to maintain a clear focus in the classroom:

The school is an outstanding school I work in and gets really high results and discipline is second to none, so you get a lot of opportunity to learn, so as a by-product of the school being so good, it's made me have a better grasp of my subject and know how to teach it effectively,

without any behavioural sort of disruptions in lessons or anything like that, you can completely focus on the teaching (05 Experienced Teacher).

I think as a teacher, you know, you go into your classroom, that's your space. I think it's quite difficult for anything to impinge on that. I mean, sometimes, if a classroom is too small, sometimes, there's not enough seats for the students that I've got, that's sometimes problematic, … I can't get a computer and that kind of thing can impinge, but usually, you can work ways around that, but that sometimes holds you back a bit, but doesn't stop you from doing it (09 Experienced Teacher).

These examples help to illustrate the different layers of influence that exist for teachers to negotiate on a daily basis in their work. Often, these are described in negative terms – as constraints – but it is important to recognise that influences can be positive as well. Whatever they are, though, they shape the space available for the teacher to practice but that does not mean they define the teacher. Teachers do not enter the profession as blank canvasses, they are motivated differently in their choice of career, they hold varying conceptions of the good teacher - and, as Bourdieu reminds us, they are shaped by their habitus.

Structural constraints and agent virtues

The focus of this research in the Jubilee Centre was on virtues in the professional practice of teachers in schools. In this we were concerned to understand what teachers do, and more importantly perhaps, what they thought they can (or could) do to bring the idea, ideals and values that they believed to be important in shaping the character of their pupils into their practices as educators. We found that teachers were very much aware of the importance of these values in informing their activities and their aims, in particular in promoting the development of character and virtue in their pupils. However, they were also acutely conscious of the structural contexts that constrained their actions as agents and also acted to shape the outcomes of their professional practice.

For each individual teacher they were aware that their skills, competences and values had to deployed within the various levels of structural constraint that they encountered (in Bourdieu's terms their dispositions in these different fields). As Giddens' theory of structuration explains these structures are not straight-jackets, still less are they an explanation (or an excuse) for not reflecting on our roles as agents. For it is as agents, and through the intended and unintended consequences

of our actions, that these structures are created and recreated. This is clear most obviously at the micro-level, where the classroom environment is continually recreated by the hundreds of professional interactions which teachers undertake here. However, it is also true of meso and macro-level structures too. How education policy is interpreted and implemented is determined in large part by the professionals who work within it. And, whilst there may be little that we can do as individuals to re-order the socio-economic environment in which we live and work, it is ultimately the actions that we all take individually and collectively which reproduces it; and, as Sayer (2011) has argued, is why things matter to us.

Our research has revealed that virtue ethics can tell us how the *good* teacher should be, what it means to be a *good* teacher, and why *good* teaching is important (Schwartz, 2014; Campbell, 2013; Carr, 2007). Virtue ethics can also help us to understand how people learn to be *good* and why that matters. But if we do not understand the structural constraints shaping actions and the fields in which those constraints are operating then we will develop only a partial picture of their practice in enacting these virtues - or not.

As we said at the beginning, our commitment to seek to bring together social scientific analysis and the practice of virtue ethics, was informed in large part by the 'sociological imagination' that Wright Mills enjoined us to employ over half a century ago. His core messages on what social science was, and what it was not, have underpinned the arguments that we have developed here in this revisiting of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues research on the professional practice of teachers. We wanted to draw on a theoretical analysis of the structural constraints that shape our social (and individual) world. We wanted to use empirical data (both quantitative and qualitative) to provide us with an informed understanding of how and why teachers act as they do. We wanted to bring together analysis of the actions and impacts of teachers with normative concerns about the ideas, ideals and values that they felt should underpin these. And, what is more, we wanted to draw on an Aristotelian eudaimonic concern to make human flourishing a core feature of the professional practice of teachers. As Wright Mills encouraged us to do, therefore, we wanted to utilise social science not just to understand the world, but also to improve it though social action.

This paper has only begun to explore how and why we might seek to develop such a symbiosis. The task for future research, and professional development, is to take up a more detailed analysis of how structural factors constrain, and enable, teachers; and how, through the exercise of their own character and virtues, teachers are able to transcend and to transform these. And what was clear

from our research was that this was a task to which most of our respondents were also strongly committed.

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