THE JUBILEE CENTRE FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

Insight Series

Some Clarifications on 'Character Sought' as an Essential Part of Character Education

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Introduction

Members of the Jubilee Centre are often asked to clarify what they mean by ‘character sought’ in the context of the Centre’s widely used *A Framework for Character Education in Schools* (2017), where ‘character sought’ is placed beside ‘character caught’ and ‘character taught’ as an essential ingredient in character development and education pursued along neo-Aristotelian lines. Most readers have an intuitive grasp of ‘caught’ and ‘taught’ character. Everyone will agree that a lot of character development takes place through a process of osmosis where students gradually pick up and internalise traits of reacting and acting that they witness around them within the ethos of their classroom/school/university – and the same for professionals in their workplaces. We also know how positive character traits, which we call ‘virtues’, can be taught explicitly as part of classes in moral or character education, PSHE, religious education, and even social and emotional learning. But what about ‘character caught’ – where does that fit into a model of character development and education?

We aim to answer that question below by first explaining the idea in broad and simple terms; then by relating it to a neo-Aristotelian model of character development; and finally by placing it in the context of Enlightenment ideas about autonomy, authenticity, meaning, and purpose.

Character Sought: The Essentials

Character sought is, in the view of the Jubilee Centre, intertwined with character caught and taught. All three approaches to character education develop together if appropriate educational opportunities are provided for students. Character sought involves the desire to discern and freely pursue one’s own character development. It involves reflection and ultimately planning and setting your 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 Jubilee Centre’s *My Character* project (2011-2014) focused on how to guide and help stimulate self-reflection in students by encouraging them to discuss their future goals for life. The project’s resources asked students to consider where they were headed in life and to examine whether adjustments were needed. The goal was to encourage students not to live an unexamined life. Through guided reflection students can give serious thought to their behaviour, thoughts, emotions, and desires. Guided self-reflection can also generate an increased sense of purpose that can imbue life with meaning and connect students with something larger than themselves.

An important aspect of students deciding for themselves how their character is to be formed are those choices students make regarding connections with others. While character is a property of an individual, virtues are formed and sustained through positive relationships in community with others. Virtues are acquired and exercised through interpersonal commitments. As Aristotle thought, and as is now accepted by many liberals and communitarians, these relationships begin in the immediate family, and extend through wider family relationships, peers, the local neighbourhood, and on to a variety of associations within civic communities. Students seeking character will choose wisely, prioritising those friendships and associations that enable them to develop and enhance their character in positive ways, such as through service to others.

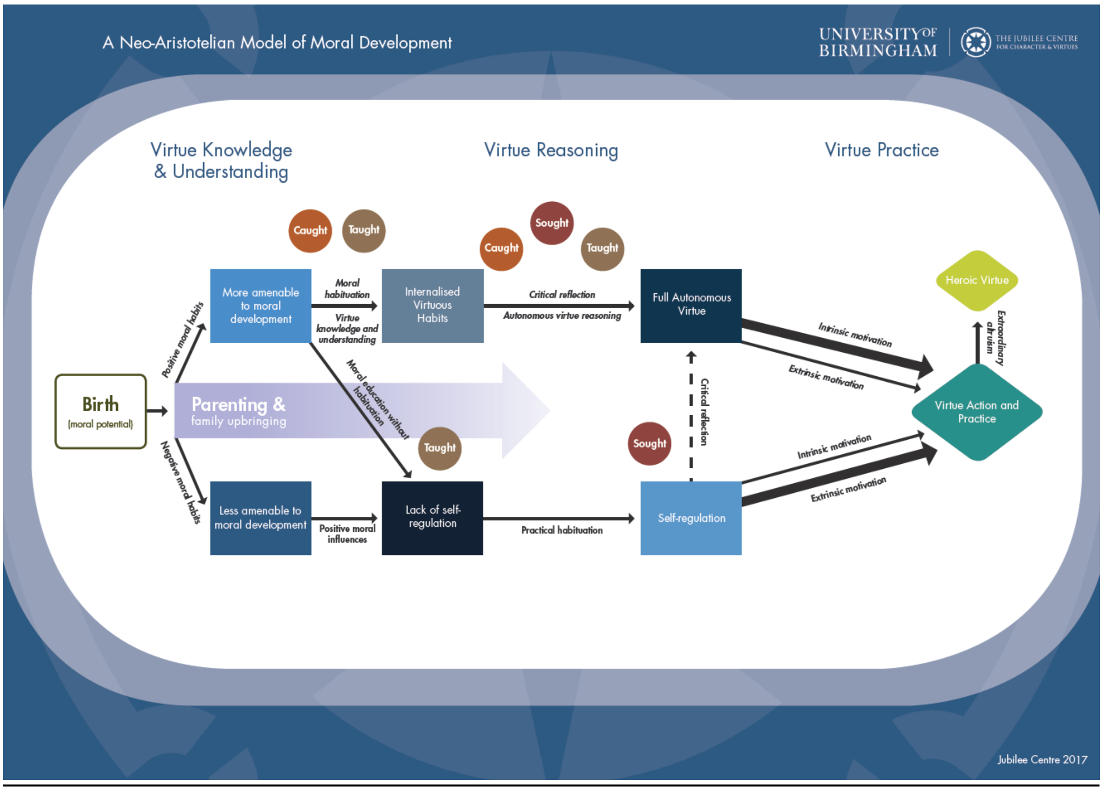
At some stage in life, students ought to decide for themselves how their character is continuing to be formed. They need eventually to oversee their own life by controlling their own character formation to some considerable degree. They need to ask what sort of person they should become and what should they do in light of being that kind of person. This is about the process of entering adulthood and accepting responsibility for oneself by making independent choices. This does not occur in a vacuum since a good education would have already provided character caught and taught, which means that implicit commitments to the virtues will already be in place. Students with such an education will have learnt that if they are not dependable they will lose credibility among friends. They will know that if they fail to value honesty, they will be unable to maintain a relationship with an honest person. They will know that if they are not committed to compassion, kindness, and respect for others then they cannot expect to experience those in return. Through reflection students can consider what direction they will take into the future, and many will want to be the best person they can be and make a positive contribution to their community. Students will need to be motivated by their beliefs and values to feel committed. The aims of ‘character sought’ include making and exercising commitments such as the below:

1. Setting the right direction for life.
2. Bringing purpose and meaning to actions undertaken.
3. Firming up decisions to act virtuously.
4. Being faithful to relationships.
5. Strengthening integrity.
6. Committing to the virtues as a course of action.
7. Seeking out and consciously cultivating practical wisdom (*phronesis*).

These commitments must be entered into freely; otherwise ‘good character’ in the literal sense is not possible. The Jubilee Centre's *Teaching and Learning Inventory* (2022) explicitly highlights the kinds of teaching and learning approaches a school can employ to encourage ‘character sought’.

How Does Character Sought Fit into a Neo-Aristotelian Model?

Aristotle’s own account of character development clearly needs some reconstruction for it to constitute a developmental model in the modern sense. This was the aim of the reconfiguration presented in the Jubilee Centre’s *Framework*:


A Neo-Aristotelian Model of Moral Development
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THE JUBILEE CENTRE FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES
Virtue Knowledge & Understanding
Virtue Reasoning
Virtue Practice
Birth (moral potential)
Parenting & family upbringing
Positive moral habits
Negative moral habits
Caught
Taught
More amenable to moral development
Moral habituation
Virtue knowledge and understanding
Internalised Virtuous Habits
Moral education without habituation
Less amenable to moral development
Positive moral influences
Lack of self-regulation
Taught
Caught
Sought
Taught
Critical reflection
Autonomous virtue reasoning
Full Autonomous Virtue
Practical habituation
Self-regulation
Sought
Critical reflection
Intrinsic motivation
Extrinsic motivation
Intrinsic motivation
Extrinsic motivation
Virtue Action and Practice
Extraordinary altruism
Heroic Virtue
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Figure 1. A Neo-Aristotelian Model of Moral Development.

This model includes two trajectories towards moral development. The upper trajectory in the model, which we could name Plan A, is for those fortunate enough to have been brought up by good people (as moral exemplars), exemplifying moral habits and endowed with sufficient material resources. Those fortunate children are the ones most amenable to moral development. They internalise moral habits by copying what they see being done by their role models, and gain virtue knowledge and understanding through both 'caught' and 'taught' methods, adapted to their temperamental dispositions. Guided by emulated mentors, they become, step-by-step, 'just by doing just actions,' 'brave by doing brave actions,' etc. (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103b1–2). What is more, to draw on an analogy from the field of nutrition, they eat their 'greens' because they enjoy their taste; they do not need to force themselves to 'eat' the right things, and their emotions harmonise with their action choices.

At some stage, then (Aristotle is mostly silent about when this happens, though one would presume in late adolescence and early adulthood), the young gradually begin to develop critical thinking and reflection and revisit critically the traits with which they were originally inculcated: subjecting their merely habituated virtues to revision. They now learn the value of moral goods 'sought,' in addition to simply being 'caught' and 'taught', and advance towards the stage of full autonomous virtue, which Aristotle calls '*phronetic*' (i.e., guided by the metacognitive capacity of *phronesis*). While some of their actions will be guided by externalist reasons (e.g., prudential motivations towards peace and sociality), most of their actions will be internally motivated by the conception they have developed of virtuous traits of character being constitutive of their identity: their second nature, so to speak.

Some people - endowed with extraordinary personal strengths and/or spurred by unusual social circumstances - will progress even further than simply being *phronimoi* (persons with *phronesis*-infused virtues), towards the level of heroic virtue. Those are the Nelson Mandelas and Martin

Luther Kings of this world – but Aristotle does consider heroic deeds supererogatory and not necessary for counting as fully virtuous.

The lower trajectory in the model, which we could name Plan B, is for those slightly less fortunate, brought up under more mixed moral conditions and hence less amenable, originally, to character-virtue development. Given that they will still have some moral exemplars in their environment to emulate – even if those happen to be outside of their immediate family – they will develop a conception of the morally good. However, because of the patchy ways in which this conception is strengthened via 'caught' methods, these children will arguably lack self-regulation. To return to the nutritional analogy, they may understand the value of eating their 'greens,' but they lack the self-control to do so as they do not really love the taste. This is the stage that Aristotle calls 'incontinence'.

Through practical habituation – either motivated by friends/mentors or their own powers of insight – a significant group of people progress towards being well self-regulated morally (i.e., in Aristotle's terminology: 'continent'); and that is a considerable moral achievement. However, it still falls short of full virtue because even if the continent now actually 'eat their greens,' they still do not particularly enjoy the experience. In other words, they have to force themselves to be good. What they end up doing may be behaviourally indistinguishable from the actions of the truly virtuous, but it is not *phronetically* motivated in the same way, but rather mostly instrumentally or extrinsically driven. Yet, some of the continent agents may succeed in climbing up to the level of full virtue (the upper Plan A-trajectory), especially if they are fortunate enough to be in the company of close friends occupying that level who teach them, through example, the value of seeking the good.

The fact that Aristotle himself seems to have considered children incapable of seeking good character for themselves does not mean that neo-Aristotelians have to 'wait' until the child reaches late adolescence or early adulthood to begin to motivate and activate the 'sought' element (the red circle in Figure 1 above). Indeed, most contemporary Aristotelians (e.g., Nancy Sherman in her 1989 book, *The Fabric of Character*) and other character educationists nowadays agree with the claim made in the previous section: namely, that parents, teachers, and other moral educators can plant the seeds of *phronesis* development from a very early age by exposing the child to the practice of seeking and giving good reasons for actions, and learning to reflect on what kind of a person the child wants to be once it 'grows up'. Thus, the emulation of role models is intimately bound up with 'sought' character development, and there is often a thin line between 'character caught' and 'character sought'.

The Link to Enlightenment Ideas

Aristotle made it clear that free choice is linked to our moral responsibility, in that our actions must be voluntary for them to have moral value. He argued that it is only when persons with moral character act voluntarily that they express their true character and can be held responsible for what they do. For Aristotle, the origin of our actions must come from within ourselves, and the actions must occur because of our desires for the outcome of the actions.

Aristotle is very explicit and demanding here. In order to take the step from merely 'caught' and habituated virtue to full 'sought' virtue, we must learn to choose the right actions and emotions from ‘a firm and unchanging state’ of character (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1105a30–34]) – that is, after having submitted them to the arbitrament of our own *phronesis*. Then and only then can the pumpkin of character development turn into a coach. This demand shows better than anything else the unreasonableness of those criticisms of neo-Aristotelianism which say that it is all about behavioural control. In fact, Aristotle does not think that merely pro-socially beneficial behaviour has any moral value whatsoever (although it is instrumentally valuable) if it is not deliberately sought and chosen from a firm state of character.

One thing which Aristotle did not have at his disposal was a command of various concepts that did not fully emerge until the Enlightenment, most notably *autonomy*, *authenticity,* and a *personal sense of purpose*. However, there is no reason for neo-Aristotelians to confine their attention to ideas from antiquity and to neglect the heritage of the Enlightenment, as it has informed classical liberalism (as represented, e.g., by John Stuart Mill). As a matter of fact, it would be possible to ‘translate’ much of what Aristotle says about the *phronesis*, as sought by the moral agent, to a classical liberal terminology of ‘autonomy’. Moreover, Aristotle’s focus on *phronesis* including a blueprint of the good life (of *eudaimonia*) is closely related to the idea of a general purpose (*telos*) behind human life. However, for ‘a personal sense of purpose’, more modern sources need to be invoked to complement the historical Aristotle.

William Damon, in his book *The Path to Purpose*, provides a helpful specification of personal purpose as ‘a stable and generalised intention to accomplish something that is at the same time meaningful to the self and consequential for the world beyond the self’ (2008, p. 33). Damon and his colleagues surveyed over twelve hundred young people in the USA between the ages of 12 and 26, interviewing a quarter of them in depth. The findings revealed that only 20% of the interviewees were ‘fully purposeful’. Approximately 25% were ‘dreamers’, with purposeful aspirations but little effort to act upon them; about 30% were ‘dabblers’, who had tried to imbue their schoolwork and life with meaning in various ways but without ever finding their niche; and 25% were ‘disengaged’, showing virtually no purpose or meaning-searching aspirations.

The Jubilee Centre has produced a wealth of empirical evidence and teaching materials that aim to help students become purposeful in life. While some of those activities may take place within the school, our research indicates that the sphere of ‘character sought’ should ideally not be limited to what takes place within the classroom or the school yard. Students should be encouraged to seek opportunities to develop their character in activities outside of the school: for example, in voluntary organisations, service learning and social-action activities, such as charity work. We recommend here, as initial reading, our reports, *Building Character through Youth Social Action* and *A Habit of Service*, which are both available for download on our website.

Although these recommendations, and the idea of individuals finding their unique sense of purpose and moral identity, seem to have gone far beyond anything that Aristotle himself taught, we believe they align in essential ways with his model of character development, where ‘character sought’ is the crowning glory of a life in which the individual and the community find and actualise their *telos* as good specimens of the human species.

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