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Character as capability

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More than test scores, fame, or fortune, it is character capabilities like integrity, empathy, and grit that underpin a good and successful life. Once recognised as a truism, today the case for character is being made again after a period of falling into disrepute: upper class, 'public school', a tool for attributing blame to the more disadvantaged in society. Character is not a term that sits easily in contemporary society, but a growing body of evidence from developmental psychology, neuroscience, and social mobility analysis is proving that character plays a foundational role in our wellbeing, and calls for a renewed focus on character are pouring in in response to recent events like the 2011 riots, the expenses scandal, and the moral and literal bankruptcy of the financial sector. A central challenge for policy makers then is how to construct policies – for education, but also for communities, families, and economic growth and sustainability – that build character and hence support the end goal of a better, fairer society.

The starting point for policy makers' interest in character today came from its perceived potential to boost social mobility, which has stagnated in the UK over the past few decades. A growing body of longitudinal evidence shows how the early development of key skills like self-regulation and an ability to defer gratification influence all sorts of long-term outcomes from academic attainment to future job earnings.[1] But character is important not just for social mobility narrowly defined as earning more than one's parents, but also for broader wellbeing: self control, resilience, and empathy have been shown to be crucial factors in all sorts of outcomes from healthy lifestyles, to maintaining and building good relationships, being a good parent, and bouncing back quickly from setbacks.[2]

Whilst psychometric testing and evaluation has contributed to our contemporary understanding of the role that character plays in shaping better lives, the logic behind such findings has been alive and well for millennia. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics,* was written to set out the ways in which people can become better, or more able to pursue what is good. The Greek *ta ethika* translates not to 'the ethics' but more directly to 'matters to do with character'. The Greek words '*ethike arete'* or '*arete'* occur often in Aristotle's writing to indicate 'excellence of character' or simply 'excellence'. Importantly, Aristotle didn't really distinguish between technical and moral goodness. Instead, being good was a skill applied to a certain end, rather than a fixed, moral attribute. For Aristotle, being a 'good' person, or having a 'good character' had similarities to being a good craftsman or a good cook. It is something one can acquire through the development of skills – or practical wisdom. In his words: *we are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit*.

Character is therefore a complex idea – it describes the qualities that makes someone a 'good' – or not so good – person, but also is a set of skills that contribute to personal success and wellbeing.

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[1] Feinstein, L. *The Relative Economic Importance of Academic, Psychological and Behavioural Attributes Developed in Childhood* (Brighton: University of Sussex, 2000) & http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/content/cntareas/reading/li1lk23.htm Mid-continent research for education and learning: 1998)

[2] Grit: Resilience and control, 21st-century lessons in character (Young Foundation: 2009) & see also Lexmond, J & Reeves, R *Building Character* (Demos: 2009)

Today, practical wisdom is couched in the different language of skills or capacities: self-control, grit, resilience and an ability to bounce back quickly from misfortune, compassion and commitment, creativity, flexibility, courage, trust, hope, empathy, self-regulation. All of these traits and skills are things that can in some way be built up over time. Neuroscience has taught us that habit forms through the development of neural pathways; the result of repetition.[3] Much of this modern science accords with this Aristotelian perspective. It also builds on this idea by showing the particular importance of early years and youth as a site for development.

The key finding is that our brains are particularly malleable, or plastic, at the beginning of life. Plasticity is the way that our experiences configure the neural pathways in our brains through new synaptic connections. The process continues through the whole of life but it is the earliest years when the brain has its highest plasticity. New research in 'epigenetics' – the study of how genes interact with the environment – shows that middle childhood is also important - when genes can be switched on and off by experiences, thereby creating enduring propensities.[4] As children become teenagers, the brain undergoes a process of 'pruning', or streamlining neural networks. This process helps to make previously conscious activity more automatic, as well as creating new space and capacity for the teenage brain to apply itself to more complex tasks. As children become young adults into their early twenties, higher functions in the pre-frontal cortex are developed, where risk calculation and planning, among other capacities are based.[5] So early years and youth are key times for the development of character.

Whether these skills or sets of skills are developed or not is often down to the type of environments that young people find themselves in and the quality of care and support that they have around them in their foundational years.[6] Parents, unsurprisingly, play a key role here. The unconditional love, care and attention that they provide to their child is the foundation for the development of trust.[7] A lack of responsive care in infancy leads to insecurity, and in extremes to an inability to cope with uncertainty. On this foundation the capacities to love and empathise with others in return is built. As babies grow into toddlers and begin to want to do thing for themselves, parents provide clarity and consistency through setting rules and boundaries, helping children to learn about getting on with and respecting others as well as planning ahead. This is why parenthood, early childhood, childcare, and early education are such key areas for policy makers to focus on if they are serious about building character.

Despite this, many question whether policy makers have any right to dig into matters of character. If, like Aristotle said, being of good character means excelling at the task of pursuing a good life – it raises the very important question of what a good life is. Aristotle

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[3] Doidge, N, *Th Brain That Changes Itself,* London: Penguin, 2008.

[4] http://harryhoare.wordpress.com/2010/10/11/interview-with-dr-marcus-pembrey-world-leader-in-the-field-of-epigenetics/

[5] SJ Blakemore, *Brain Development During Adolescence and Beyond,* London: Institue For Cultural Research, 2007.

[6] Kiernan, K & Mensah, F. *Poverty, Maternal Depression, Family Status, and Children's Cognitive and Emotional Development in Early Childhood: A longitudinal study* (London: Centre for Longitudinal Studies, 2008).

[7] For example see Kraemer, Sebastian 'How does insecure attachment impair character development' in *The Character Inquiry.* Eds. Lexmond, J & Grist, M (Demos: 2011).

described the ultimate human goal as the one that we seek for itself, with no further end. This is *eudaimonia,* or put in layman's terms, happiness and flourishing. Character is then the route to happiness and flourishing, and it's both a self-interested idea in that it leads to happiness, but also an other-interested idea in that it is about being good – a good person, partner, parent, friend, citizen, and so on. This is tricky. Few would argue against the idea that the state should be ensuring that individuals in society are able to pursue their own happiness to the fullest extent. But when it comes to dictating what that life looks like, we put strong limits on the state's intervention. Policies to build character should therefore be about building the foundational skills necessary to *pursue* a good life; not about setting out exactly what that life will look like.

As a recipient of 'character education' myself as a high school student in the United States, I experienced this complexity and contradiction head on. Each Wednesday, we spent an hour in homeroom discussing a character 'word of the week': fairness, honesty, compassion. The intrinsic value of these concepts was clear to me as it was to my classmates and teachers. And yet in discussing what they meant, we were forced into the territory of their application. I lived in a strongly Conservative area of the Deep South, in an affluent, suburban district. My lessons took place against a backdrop of the developing war in Iraq, and the questionable rationale that was being communicated to us by Bush and Blair. I lived in a community that was still clearly marked by deep racial inequality, and one where policies to address inequality as denoted by the 'welfare state' were commonly derided as socialist or 'pinko-liberal' concepts. Naturally, discussions of 'right' and 'wrong' in character education class were strongly influenced by the dominant political, religious, and economic outlook of the day. But my view of how to live out honesty, fairness, and compassion looked very different to what was happening around me. I felt very keenly that there was a difference between the virtues we were being taught about and the myriad of ways that these virtues could be applied in the real world.

In a complex world, there will always be many ways to exercise compassion or to embody fairness. These decisions must be made in the moment, in particular scenarios, and can never be taught abstractly. So there are genuine concerns with being too prescriptive about what a 'good character' looks like and what a 'good life' is made up of. Clearly, taking the slew of public scandals over recent years across the political and financial sectors, we have been reminded that those in positions of authority in society have no monopoly on the exercise of good character. The decision, due to heavy political pressure, to jail a young person for looting a bottle of water during the 2011 Summer riots only barely in the wake of the massive MP expenses scandal is a case in point.

So how can we build the character capabilities that we know are crucial to success and wellbeing but avoid being prescriptive and culturally exclusive about what a 'good' life looks like?

The answer is to think of character as capability. Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum conceptualise capability as a set of general abilities that allow an individual to live a flourishing life, in both an ethical and instrumental sense.[8] For example, feeling empathy for someone's situation can be about an ethical ability to provide comfort to someone who is

[8] Sen, A. *Development as Freedom* (Oxford University Press: 1999)

upset, or alternatively, an instrumental ability to provide good customer service to customers or clients. Applying ones self to a task can be simply about getting what one wants – to get the job, you've got to apply yourself to writing an application. But it can also be ethically understood – to be a good parent you apply yourself continually to parenting to do the best for your child. In other words, application is about commitment and commitment can be ethical or instrumental. Usually it will be both. Furthermore, it feels like there is a relationship between the two – you can't genuinely possess character without being capable of being good, just as you can't be good without to some extent possessing the instrumental capabilities necessary to actualise good intentions.[9]

For Sen and Nussbaum, capabilities are internal and external. Character capabilities are ones that we find inside ourselves, but, like all internal capabilities, their development and sustenance are dependent on external factors being in place. In normal circumstances, an individual might be highly skilled at weighing up the pros and cons of long-term consequences. But in a banking firm where all institutional capability for reinforcing and supporting such behaviour in lost, the internal capability of prudence may diminish. So to focus on character is to look inside ourselves. But when we do so, we find our gaze immediately pushed outward, on to that which sustains our inner traits."[10] For policy makers, building inner character is also going to be about creating the right sorts of environments for young people to grow up in.

Much of this thinking is at play in the current policy approach towards behaviour change. Embodied by Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler's 'nudge' concept, the Behavioural Insights Team in the Cabinet Office is occupied with finding ways to subtly influence human decision making to be more healthy, environmentally friendly, and pro-social.[11] They do this through making changes to the 'choice architecture' around us – the myriad of ways that choices are presented to us in the world.

Increasingly, the sum total of poor decisions by individuals is leading to expensive public problems: from smoking and obesity putting strain on the NHS, to binge-drinking and its associated anti-social behaviours hollowing out town centres and breaking down communities. In a different arena, the shift to a lower carbon economy can only be accomplished through large-scale behaviour change. Whilst 'nudges' in the right direction seem to work in some contexts (usually on the margins), it feels like deeper and more conscious engagement is also required to genuinely tackle the complex and systemic challenges that we face today. To create lasting change, we need citizens who are capable of doing the right things consciously, and for the right reasons, not just because it's easier. As John Stewart Mill said, '*it really is of importance not only what men do, but also what manner of men they are that do it*' – subtract out the exclusive 'men' for 'people' and he's on to something.

Importantly, 'nudge' and 'character' based approaches can work together.[12] Whilst long-

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[9] *The Character Inquiry* (Demos: 2011) Eds., Lexmond, J & Grist, M.

[10] ibid

[11] Thaler, RH & Sunstein, CR. *Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth and happiness,* New Haven and London: Yale Univeristy Press, 2008.

[12] John, P, Smith, G and Stoker, G 'Nudge, nudge, think, think: two strategies for changing civic behaviour' www.civibehaviour.org.uk/documents/nudge_nudge_think_think_PJ5May2009.pdf

term behaviour change will only come through the establishment of new habits, these habits can be strengthened and developed more easily within supportive contexts. For example, creating a habit of healthy eating will require persistence and an ability to say no to unhealthy food choices, but it can be supported or deterred based on the kinds of food outlets in the vicinity of ones home and place of work. If the options are fast foot outlets, it is going to be more difficult to eat well then if the options include fresh fruit and vegetables at an affordable cost.

The most effective strategies to build character cannot take aim at it directly. Teaching a child about the importance of applying herself, or being compassionate to others, or believing in their own ability to shape their future can make a difference, and it is important that there are spaces at school for these kinds of conversations, but being taught didactically about good character will not automatically lead to its development. The accompanying focus on creating supportive environments and providing opportunities for experiential learning is also key.[13] Crucially, this allows young people the opportunity to apply their foundational skills to real world scenarios; forging the practical wisdom they need to exercise character in the day to day and to pursue their own conception of the good life.

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[13] for example see the Studio Schools concept, which is now being rolled out and scaled in many areas of the UK