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The Meaning and Use of Dialogue in Aristotelian Character Education

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1. Introduction: criticising character education

Despite the popularity of Aristotelian approaches to moral education, character education is and has not been without its critics. One of them was Lawrence Kohlberg (1981, p. 9), who famously characterised it as the 'bag of virtues' approach, by which he meant that everyone can compose his own list of virtues and interpret these virtues differently. This would amount to moral relativism, a stage which, in Kohlberg's view, needed to be transcended. Other critics do not only have a problem with 'virtue' as the *goal* of moral education, but in particular with the *methods* used to cultivate virtue in schools. These methods, such as teaching by example, habituation and storytelling, would mainly shape or mould students' virtues, but not enable them to think critically about whether the virtues being instilled really *are* virtues.

Back in the 1930s, Hartshorne and May already noted that 'traditional' approaches to character education, which rely on didactic training, exhortation, and teaching by example, can do more harm than good since they do not help students to learn to pass moral judgments when facing the practical demands of real-life situations (Nucci, 2001, p. 127). After the revival of character education in the early 1990s, Robert Nash (1997) argued that character education is a "deeply and seriously flawed" project, which is inherently authoritarian, anti-intellectual and aligned with conservative politics. In addition, Alfie Kohn (1997) argued that virtues are "slippery terms", often used as "euphemisms for uncritical deference to authority". In his view, demanding students to be respectful or responsible is nothing more than "getting them to do whatever the adults demand". More recently, Harvey Siegel (2014, p. 4) argued in a similar vein that the task of education is not to 'shape' students' characters but to 'liberate' them, i.e. "to enable them to envision possible characters, traits and virtues and to evaluate their desirability critically".

Several Aristotelian disciples have admitted that character education has shortcomings. For example, Althof & Berkowitz (2006, p. 500) note that Kohlberg's approach, including his Just Community Schools and moral dilemma discussions, is a liberal, democratic kind of moral education, while traditional character education "has relied more on conservative and hierarchical methods (e.g. adult advocacy, direct teaching, presentations of inspirational cultural artefacts)." When writing about role modelling as a method for moral education, Kristján Kristjánsson (2006, p. 40) warns that "if character educationists do not aim higher than simply wanting to replace copycat vice with copycat virtue" they seem to be presenting an unsophisticated, undemanding and uncritical – almost infantilising – model of emulation". Taking a good look at themselves and their likes, these authors seem to agree that at least some kinds of character education are problematic.

The adjectives 'traditional', 'conservative' or 'authoritarian' used by both proponents and opponents of character education seem to refer to the American-style character education introduced in the late 1980s by William Bennett, author of 'The Book of Virtues' and Education Secretary in the Reagan government. Often, Bennett is grouped together with *Thomas Lickona*, *William Kilpatrick*, Edward Wynn and other educationalists who largely espoused traditional American and Christian values. The concerns about the ways character is cultivated seems to be that these didactical instruments lead to indoctrination, which could turn character education in public schools into an instrument for conservative or religious agendas (Yu, 2004, p. 21). Liberals could argue that for example a Christian virtue catalogue, coupled with methods such as storytelling, prevents students from making up their own minds about whether the character traits instilled in them, such as charity or humility, really are ingredients of a good life.

After having reviewed how other twentieth century approaches to moral education (i.e. cognitive development, care ethics and values clarification) perceived character education, I concluded that one of the four challenges character education faces if it is to be taken seriously today is to show how it can be a *critical* practice (Sanderse, 2012, p. 70). One way to do this is to show that the above-mentioned strategies can be rethought and reconstructed so they do contain a critical element. For example, virtue ethicists have argued that methods such as habituation (Sherman, 1989; Steutel & Spiecker, 2004) and role modelling (Kristjánsson, 2006; Sanderse, 2013) are not necessary indoctrinative and can be interpreted in a critical way too. But does character education have more in stock than the re-interpretation of these already suspect

methods? Another strategy, which is pursued in this paper, is to find out whether it is justified to consider ‘dialogue’, which is often seen as a method that cultivates critical thinking, as a character educational method too.

In order to show what place dialogue has or can have in Aristotelian character education, the paper is divided in six sections. In Section 2, I will examine whether Thomas Lickona, one of the founding fathers of character education in the United States in the early 1990s, regards ‘dialogue’ as a strategy to foster students’ moral knowledge. We will see that Lickona borrows a dialogue method from Kohlberg and the necessary skills from Socrates, which raises the question whether character education has to rely on ‘alien’ sources. In the remainder of the paper, I will therefore consider whether Aristotle can provide us with his own dialogue method. In Section 3, we will examine what Aristotle has to say in the *Nicomachean Ethics* about dialogue as a moral educational method. In Section 4, we will focus instead on the dialectical form of the text itself and on what he writes about dialogue in the *Rhetoric* and *Topics*. We will see that Aristotle integrated Socrates’ intellectual legacy into his own theory to such an extent that it is difficult to call Socratic dialogues an ‘alien’ element in Aristotle’s account of cultivating virtue. In Section 5, it is examined whether the account of dialogue derived from the ancient Greeks lead to a kind of knowledge that is practical enough to contribute to the development of virtuous character and practical wisdom. Finally, we will draw on Alasdair Macintyre’s ideas about socially embodied moral concepts to answer the question whether Aristotle’s account of dialogue is critical enough to satisfy its critics.

2. Dialogue in character education

In due course, we will see how Aristotle would react to the critique that cultivating virtues is uncritical and authoritarian, but first we will examine whether the criticism just mentioned does justice to the kind character education targeted, i.e. the American character education literature from the early 1990s. The question what place dialogue has in the literature will be explored by concentrating on the work of one of its founding fathers. In *Educating for Character* (1991), Thomas Lickona recommends twelve strategies teachers and schools can use to foster pupils’ character. Three of these strategies – being a caregiver, model and mentor, encouraging moral conflict resolution, and stimulating moral reflection – are devoted to fostering students’ moral knowledge.

Before we can understand why Lickona thinks these strategies contribute to the growth of moral knowledge, we need to know what he means by ‘moral knowledge’. The first thing to notice is that Lickona (1991) does not treat ‘moral knowledge’ as a separate (intellectual) virtue. He does write about the virtue of ‘prudence’, but equates it with ‘not putting ourselves in physical or moral danger’ (p. 46), thereby turning the Latinised equivalent of Aristotle’s intellectual virtue *phronesis* (*prudentia*) into self-preservation or self-interest. For Lickona, the “core of a universal public morality” is constituted by the virtues of respect and responsibility (p. 43). Nevertheless, Lickona does give moral knowledge centre stage in his work as part of his definition of ‘character’. In his view, “Good character consists of knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good” (p. 51). In comparison to the neo-Kohlbergian ‘four component model’, Lickona advocates a ‘three component model’ of moral functioning, with ‘character’ as the name of the overarching goal instead of just one component. As ‘respect’ and ‘responsibility’ are Lickona’s two cardinal virtues, ‘moral knowledge’ is not a separate intellectual virtue but rather a psychological component of these two moral virtues. However, in his *Character Matters*, Lickona (2004) seems to have changed his mind. He now explicitly mentions ‘wisdom’ as one of the ‘ten essential virtues’ (p. xxv) and equates it with ‘good judgment’ about what is both good for us and for others. In an Aristotelian fashion, he describes it as the virtue that “tells us how to put the other virtues into practice – when to act, how to act, and how to balance different virtues when they conflict” (p. 8).

In order to increase the quality of our moral knowledge, Lickona (1991) advises teachers to ‘model moral concern and moral reasoning’ and serve as ethical mentors by ‘providing moral instruction and guidance’ through e.g. explanations and classroom discussion (p. 72). Moreover, he dedicates three chapters to the question on how teachers can organise class meetings, encourage moral reflection and raise the level of moral discussion. He explicitly acknowledges that “moral reflection is necessary to develop the cognitive side of character – the important part of our moral selves that enables us to make moral judgments about our own behaviour and that of others.” (p. 229). Teachers can give students assignments to reflect on their own, but they can also use other strategies to stimulate moral reflection through conversations in the classroom. What Lickona has in common with Kohlberg is their aversion towards moral relativism. Just like Kohlberg, Lickona (1991, p. 239) criticises values clarification for only helping students to get to know the values they already had. In Lickona’s view, values clarification failed to address the

question whether the values *desired* by the students are also *desirable*. Lickona, who began in the 1960s with research on young children's moral reasoning, is sympathetic towards the dilemma discussion method that Kohlberg developed, because he recommends teachers to ask students about the arguments students use to justify their opinions (see Lickona, 2014). While this can be done in informal ways too, Lickona (1991, p. 253) prefers teachers to choose a "format" for moral reflection and discussion so students think carefully and critically about a value issue and engage in "systematic ethical analysis". When discussing the skills that teachers need to conduct these dialogues, Lickona (1991, p. 251) suggests that teachers need the skill of 'Socratic questioning' to make students doubt their opinions and move on to a higher level of moral reasoning.

From Lickona's ideas about the relationship between moral knowledge and dialogue we can draw two conclusions. First, the critique that virtues would be cultivated in an authoritarian and indoctrinative way does not apply to what Lickona's publisher calls 'the bible of the character education movement' and not his fellow character education colleagues either (see e.g. Kilpatrick, 1993, ch. 6). Moral knowledge is part and parcel of every virtue, and group discussions are recommended to develop students' cognitive side of character. Second, we can conclude that Lickona's approach to character education is 'comprehensive'. For example, despite being very critical of values clarification, Lickona (1991, p. 11) still thinks that value clarification techniques can be "integrated into a broader approach to moral education". Because it is unlikely that any of these approaches possess the 'holy grail', Lickona's pragmatic strategy to combine elements from different approaches makes sense, but it is not always clear whether the philosophical and psychological assumptions underlying these strategies are compatible too. In particular Lickona's affinity with Kohlberg's cognitive development approach makes us lose sight of the question whether character education may have its own dialogue strategy, possibly even one that better fits the purpose of cultivating students' characters.

Lickona turned to Kohlberg and Socrates for help, and I consulted the latter myself when I previously argued that 'Socratic dialogues' should be considered part of character education in schools as they can foster what Aristotle called 'practical wisdom' (Sanderse, 2012, ch. 4.4; Sanderse, 2015b, p. 9). In the next section, I will revisit this argument and check whether turning for help to Socrates is really necessary, or whether Aristotle can take care of itself.

3. Dialogue in Aristotle's *Ethics*

The assumption that dialogue would not be an Aristotelian method of cultivating virtue has been “a source of some embarrassment” for character educationalists, as leading virtue ethicist Kristján Kristjánsson (2014b, p. 333) has put it. To take away this embarrassment, Kristjánsson has argued that dialogue does not have to be treated as an ‘alien’ element, because it is actually a crucial element of Aristotelian character education. This raises the question where in the *Nicomachean Ethics* we can find Aristotle’s account of dialogue. We will first look at what Aristotle has to say about dialogue in the passages on moral education, before we turn to Kristjánsson’s solution to broaden our scope by looking at what Aristotle writes about friendship.

A first thing to notice is that Aristotle hardly uses ‘dialogue’ and ‘discussion’ in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1934). ‘Arguing’ and ‘argument’ do not occur frequently in the text either. Where Aristotle does use related words such as ‘conversation’, ‘reasoning’, ‘theories’ and ‘philosophy’ in the context of the cultivation of virtue, he stresses the limits of these methods. For example, in Book X, Aristotle writes that “theories have power to stimulate and encourage generous youths”, but he adds that they are “powerless to stimulate the mass of mankind to moral nobility”. Aristotle is convinced that “he that lives at the dictates of passion will not hear nor understand the reasoning of one who tries to dissuade him” (NE 1179b5-20). Why do ‘theories’ not make a difference in the life of people who are interested in sensory pleasure, money or fame? Aristotle thinks that people already need to have *some* ‘love of what is noble’ if they are to be susceptible to reasoning. If they have not developed an interest in virtue, changing their lives through arguments is “difficult if not impossible” (NE 1179b18). These people will only start to listen to reason if they are somehow *forced* to do so (see, however, Kristjánsson, 2014a). Enforcing laws is a good way to discipline adults because “they are more amenable to compulsion and punishment” (NE1180a6).

Because most adults are motivated by fear instead of by shame, Aristotle advises administrators to design laws and appropriate punishments, so they at least obey the rules. This seems grist to the mill of present-day critics of Aristotelian character education. Was Kohn (1997) right in claiming that character education is a kind of ‘uncritical deference to authority’? It should be noted that the label ‘the many’ (*hoi polloi*) that Aristotle uses does not refer to the *majority* of people. To avoid confusion, we could call them ‘the morally indifferent’: they are not vicious, but there is no place for the idea that moral and intellectual virtue could play a role in

their flourishing too (Sanderse, 2015a, p. 387). The indifferent believe that happiness consists of things such as bodily pleasure, honour or money (NE 1095a22-23). Actually, Aristotle believes that the majority of people is morally better off than this: they are somewhere between ‘a lack of self-control’ (*akrasia*) and ‘self-control’ (*enkrateia*) (Pakaluk, 2005, p. 235). He is also optimistic about the youth. He recommends to ‘discipline’ them, so that their minds “have been prepared by the cultivation of habits”, in order that they “like and dislike aright” (NE1179b24-26). Aristotle stresses that “it is of very great, or rather of supreme, importance” to train the correct sort of moral habit right from childhood” (NE1103b21-5). He compares the habituation of virtues with tilling the soil; if this is done properly, listening to the arguments of someone else can later can foster the development of the seed, i.e. wisdom (NE1179b24-30).

From this selection of textual evidence, I draw four conclusions. First, Aristotle’s account of moral education seems to centre on disciplining, forcing and punishing *adults* who are less than virtuous because of their upbringing and choices. This view of moral education might explain some of the critique aired in Section 2. However, this is not all Aristotle has to say about moral education. Second, it is precisely because Aristotle thinks that moral change is difficult when habits *have been* formed that he stresses the importance of moral education from a very young age. Third, if early habituation is done properly, there is room for studying the good life on a more theoretical level later. Once someone has had an “all-round education” and has received a training in virtue, he is able to discuss and criticise virtue too (NE 1094b25-30). In the contemporary Aristotelian *scholarship*, the *connection* between the seemingly mindless habituation of moral virtue with the development of the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom e.g. through shared deliberation is the locus of sustained *controversy* (Sherman, 1989; Curzer, 2012, ch. 15; Kristjánsson, 2007, ch. 3). A fourth conclusion, which matters most for our present examination, is the inconvenient truth that we still have not come across Aristotle’s view about the meaning or use of *dialogues* in the cultivation of virtue. We are still short of details on how dialogue works in an Aristotelian framework.

Aware of this problem, Kristjánsson (2014b, p. 342) suggests to examine an underexplored source, i.e. Aristotle’s description of character friendships, to tease out its potential implications for moral education (see also Sherman, 1989, ch. 4; Burger, 2008, ch. 6). The insight that Kristjánsson offers us here is that moral education in schools does not only happen through a ‘vertical’ relationship between a teacher and his pupils, but also through a

‘horizontal’ one in which students can stimulate each other’s moral development. It is certainly worthwhile to tease out the moral educational implications of Aristotle’s account of character friendships, and friendship also seems a prerequisite for dialogue (see Section 6) but it is less evident that friendship will give us an account of dialogue as a specific method for moral education. To substantiate these doubts, let us briefly look at Kristjánsson’s (2014b, p. 345) arguments for the claim that dialogue would be “the crucial medium” for the mutual moral development of friends. Kristjánsson mainly relies on an excellent study by Talbot Brewer on virtue and friendship. Brewer (2005, p. 724) writes that a character friendship can take shape between people only if they “share in conversation and other activities” and attend to how the good character is progressively unveiled “in each other’s words and actions”. Conversations certainly seem to be an important medium for friends to shape each other’s moral outlooks.

However, while Brewer (2005, p. 735) writes that character friendships “will be marked by conversation about matters of importance to them both”, he also remarks that “a similar referential richness and assurance of mutual understanding attends many other things that friends do together” (p. 744). Talbot certainly mentions ‘conversation’ between friends, but Kristjánsson seems to have overstated that conversations are *the* crucial medium for developing character friendships. In the *Politics* (Book VIII), Aristotle puts, besides dialogue, a strong emphasis on an all-round and balanced development, including play, physical training and music. So, the question can be raised why *doing* things together, such as going to the gym, watching a movie or listening to music would be less important ways for friends to cultivate character? But, even if I concede that dialogue is an indispensable method to stimulate moral development, a second issue remains.

Talbot writes about ‘conversation’ and ‘talking’, but nowhere about ‘dialogue’. Is this a linguistic issue, or does Aristotle’s description of friendship not offer an account of *dialogue* at all? So, what is ‘dialogue’? Does the English ‘to converse with’ cover the meaning of the Greek ‘*dialektike*’, or does it also refer to the more systematic practice of Socratic questioning? The problem with Kristjánsson’s ideas about dialogue is that they rule out the relevance of these more systematic dialogues for the classroom. Kristjánsson (2014b, p. 348) has dialogues of an “everyday, natural sort” in mind that do not have “an unnecessarily learned flavour”. He is particularly sympathetic towards Nel Noddings’ ideas about dialogue on moral issues about the rough-and-tumble of real people, instead of what he calls the ‘formulaic’, ‘artificial’ or even

‘barren’ dialogues advocated by Kohlberg, Habermas or the Philosophy for Children movement. I agree with Kristjánsson that dialogues should have children’s own experiences as point of departure (and return), and I agree that discussion partners should mutually wish each other well, in order for dialogues to be formative. However, I agree with Lickona that this does not imply that dialogues about the good life cannot or should not be more structured. The disadvantage of Noddings’ (1984, p. 176) approach to dialogue is that she focusses so much on the caring relationship between student and teacher, that *what* they are talking about, the subject matter, gets out of sight. By appealing to Noddings’ interpretation of dialogue, Kristjánsson runs the same problem.

There are two reasons why we should continue to look for a more ‘structured’ account of dialogue. The first reason is educational: many teachers are desperately looking for structured ways to discuss moral issues with students, for example on the day after the Paris attacks. Despite their wish to talk about these and other – less radical – moral issues, empirical research shows that teachers often do not address moral issues and dilemmas in the classroom (Tirri, 1999; Socket & LePage, 2002). They shy away from discussing moral issues in an explicit way and restrict their moral educational task to setting a good example through their own nonverbal performance (Klaassen, 2002, p. 155; Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2013). Teachers often doubt whether they are justified to give their own opinion, or do not know what to do when students air discriminatory or racist views. Limiting dialogue to casual, spontaneous interactions between friends, as Kristjánsson seems to do, prevents us from thinking about how teachers can better organise classroom conversations about moral issues. The second reason is philosophical: Aristotle himself offers a more formal dialectical method to question, criticise and refute popular opinions. Conducting dialogues is an art, known as ‘dialectic’, that can be formalised and which Aristotle describes in the *Organon*, his works on logic. Right at the first page of the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle (1926, Rh. 1354a1-3) makes a distinction between ‘random’ and ‘systematic’ arguments. After observing that “all men [...] have a share in both” rhetoric and dialectic, Aristotle states that his task is to formalise arguments into a ‘system’, and examine the reasons why some people are successful in convincing people and others do not. Formulating a dialectical *method* can make the argumentative exchanges between people more effective. For these reasons, we will continue our search for a kind of dialogue that goes beyond Kristjánsson’s ‘natural’ ones.

4. Aristotle's dialectical method

From reading the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which came to us in the form of a collection of edited lecture notes, one could get the impression that Aristotle preferred the form of a treatise. However, Aristotle also wrote about twenty dialogues, from which only fragments remain today. For example, the largely lost dialogue *Protrepticus* was a dialogue in which at least three characters debated about the nature and worth of philosophy. Aristotle did not only write dialogues, but also wrote extensively *about* the art of conducting dialogues ('dialectic'), such as in the *Topics* and *Rhetoric*. Finally, one could argue that other works, in particular the *Nicomachean Ethics*, contains a dialectical argument too and should be regarded as a stylised dialogue instead of a didactic treatise (Hadot, 1995, p. 97; Smith, 2001; Burger, 2008; Fink, 2012). According to Smith (2001, pp. 112-113), the advantages of this interpretation is that apparent contradictions in the text, e.g. about the place of contemplation in the good life, make the audience realise that they do not yet know what virtue is, which can stimulate their search for the good life. For Aristotle, the dialectical method is a "pedagogical device" that fosters critical inquiry (Smith, 2001, p. 5).

We can consider dialogue to be part and parcel of Aristotle's oeuvre, we do not know yet how it works? In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle (1926, Rh. 1354a1-5) briefly compares dialectic to rhetoric by saying that the latter is 'an offshoot' of the former. Both arts use logical reasoning and giving arguments, in particular through using induction and deductive syllogisms, to convince someone, the difference being that rhetoric admits of sophistical (**contentious**) **arguments**. Rhetoric is not primarily about *being* right, but *getting* right, if necessary through hiding one's intentions and using dirty tricks to crush the opponent. Both rhetoric and dialectic are about convincing people, but only dialecticians have the aim of 'helping someone achieve what they already want', which implies that both parties consent to their participation in an endeavour (Smith, 2001, p. 16). A speech can only have an effect on an audience's character if the audience is already interested, willing to cooperate, and if they have some previous familiarity with the topic. Therefore, Aristotle does not recommend to argue with everyone or practice dialectic with 'the man in the street' (*Topics*, Book VIII.14). He understands that those who do not want to be challenged and beaten by questions will "try all means of bringing about one's conclusion", and warns that bad arguments are likely to result.

As the name indicates, the *Rhetoric* is mainly on rhetoric and not on dialectic. In this regard, the *Topics* (1984, Book I.1) is illuminating as Aristotle compares dialectic with another kind of reasoning, which he calls ‘demonstration’ (*apodeixis*). When something is ‘demonstrated’ or ‘proved’, the premises referred to, such as the first principles of science or mathematics, are objectively primary and true. Dialectical reasoning does not start from such truths, but from contingent ‘truths’, i.e. premises that are generally accepted (*endoxos*) by a majority or by the most experienced and wise people. Because dialectic does not depart from facts, but from reputable opinions, Aristotle thinks that dialectical reasoning admits of more doubt than scientific demonstration. In examining the question what is good, “there is no body of knowledge at one’s disposal” (Gadamer, 1986, p. 41). It is a way of thinking that helps us to “live without certainty”, as Bertrand Russell (1945, xiv) puts it, without being “paralysed by hesitation”. While opinions about the good life are not as definitive as results from science, these opinions should not be taken for granted. This is precisely what dialectic sets out to do. Someone who practices dialectic, criticises the generally held opinions by asking questions that may reveal that these opinions are inconsistent and need to be revised. For example, someone may claim that people in Qatar are happy because Qatar is a wealthy country, thereby appealing to the popular idea that money makes people happy. A questioning conversation partner can make the speaker realise that some peoples are wealthy but unhappy, while other peoples are happy despite not being rich. Because such considerations may stimulate her to revise her original assumption, dialectic does not just clarify what people already think. By appealing to the idea that there is something like ‘living well’ for human beings, questions can lead to conclusions that go against society’s norms.

By comparing dialectical reasoning with rhetorical reasoning and scientific demonstration, we get an idea of the remit of ‘dialogues’. But how structured were they? There is little doubt that the dialectical method was a form of stylised argumentative exchange practiced in Plato’s Academy, also during the twenty years that Aristotle was a member of it (Smith, 2015). For the members of Plato’s school, engaging in dialogues was a way of life that aimed at the gradual cultivation of one’s character (Hadot, 1995, ch. 5). In dialectical contests, for example about the question ‘can virtue be taught?’, one student took the role of answerer, the other the role of questioner. They engaged in such arguments not for the sake of winning, but for inquiring into their moral commitments, requiring them to say what they think (*Topics*, Book

VIII.5). The dialectical method was also practiced during everyday discussions to examine and refute those who claim to know something. This oral form of disputation that Aristotle describes in the *Topics* is reminiscent of Socrates' elenctic interrogations. In this case, the discussion partners would not change roles: taking Socrates as an example, the student only assumed the role of the questioning party who himself did not claim to know anything. Finally, Aristotle believed that the process of dialectical reasoning is useful for philosophy as it creates puzzlements after the respectable opinions about a subject (e.g. the content of a happy life) have been enumerated. It doubts and refutes certain propositions, but it does not prove anything, and does not *in itself* help us to judge what is true and false.

When Aristotle started his own school, the Lyceum, in 335 BC, he differed from Plato in the sense that he prioritised a theoretical life over the political goal to radically change society. However, as Pierre Hadot (1995, p. 87) points out in his study on philosophical schools in Ancient Greece, it is highly unlikely that Aristotle was not influenced by his experiences in Plato's Academy, and in particular by the Socratic method used by its students. For both Plato and Aristotle, not lectures *ex cathedra* but interactive dialogue were the primary form of philosophical education, and this tradition remained common educational practice for several hundreds of years. The continuity between Aristotle, Plato and Socrates suggests that the question of whether Aristotle's account of moral education has an 'alien' Socratic element or whether it has its 'own' account of dialogue, is somewhat odd. Rather, Aristotle attempted "to take up and integrate into his thinking the intellectual legacy that he received from Socrates through Plato" (Gadamer & Da Via, 2015, p. 97). Part of this legacy is the dialectical method, practiced in the streets of Athens by Socrates and taken to the philosophical schools of Athens by Plato and Aristotle. On closer inspection, the idea that teachers conduct *Socratic* dialogues with students as part of an *Aristotelian* attempt to cultivate virtues is not embarrassing at all.

5. Dialogue, philosophy and *phronesis*

We have seen that dialogue plays an important role in Aristotle's work, but what we do not know yet is what impact dialogue may have on students' moral development. This needs to become clearer, as several educational approaches that advocate dialogue in schools, such as Philosophy for Children (P4C), pride themselves on offering a 'philosophical' method. While there is nothing wrong with (teaching) philosophy in schools, the question is whether *philosophical*

dialogues, which can also be about questions such as ‘does infinity exist?’ or ‘can robots think?’, yield something else than just *theoretical* knowledge. As Aristotle’s ethics has a practical aim, the question is what kind of dialogues enable students to make better moral judgments in their everyday life. One suggestion was offered in Section 2 by Lickona (1991, p. 229), who argued that dilemma discussions can develop students’ ability to make moral judgments, understood in a Kohlbergian way. Kohlberg did not just want children to be able to pass moral judgments as such, but moral judgments from a ‘post-conventional’ or ‘principled’ level of moral development. He saw teachers as Socratic dialogue mentors who mainly encouraged students to use arguments that were one stage above those of most of the class, so they would learn to justify their values from a universal and impartial point of view. While Lickona is on the right track when he claims that dialogue can, as part of a character education program, contribute to the development of ‘moral judgment’, the underlying Kohlbergian ideas about universal principles of justice are difficult to square with virtue ethical assumptions about the necessity and desirability of inculcation into the values and virtues of particular and partial social practices and traditions (Fullinwider, 1989).

Consequently, we have to tell a different story about how dialogue contributes to students’ moral development. A couple of years ago, I suggested that dialogue, as a component of character education, should not aim at fostering universal and prescriptive moral judgments but at developing the ‘practical wisdom’ to put character virtues in practice. In addition, I have suggested that aspects of Leonard Nelson’s ‘Socratic dialogue’ method and the method used by P4C stimulate the development of practical wisdom (Sanderse, 2012, 2015b). For example, Matthew Lipman, the founding father of P4C, did not want to bring academic philosophy to schools, but has a kind of “narrative philosophy” in mind that “emphasises dialogue” (Lipman, 2007, p. 434). Using philosophy in the classroom should, in his view, not just help students to *think*, but to think in a way that leads to *good judgment*. This involves the “flexible application of principles (criteria) to practice (judgment), extreme sensitivity to the uniqueness of particular cases (context sensitivity)” (Lipman, 2007, p. 432). It is not surprising that Juuso (2007, pp. 127-147), who investigated how P4C appears in the light of ancient Greek philosophy, concludes that Lipman’s focus on judgment can be interpreted as a ‘neo-Aristotelian effort’ to help people develop ‘practical wisdom’, the knowledge to do the right things in the right place at the right time in the right way.

How can dialogues foster a practical kind of wisdom? In order to answer this question, I take one step back and consider the place of practical wisdom within Aristotle's larger epistemology. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Book VI.3), Aristotle uses five words to account for a complete, true knowledge, i.e. *techne* (craft knowledge), *phronesis* (practical knowledge), *episteme* (scientific knowledge), *sophia* (contemplative wisdom) and *nous* (intuitive reason). These are the excellences (virtues) of the pure, theoretical part of our rationality, called 'intellectual virtues', while the character (moral) virtues are the excellences of the practical part of our rationality. On Aristotle's account, a wise man (who has *sophia*), possesses a combination of the 'truth about the first principles' (*episteme*) and knowledge about 'what follows from the first principles' (*nous*) (NE1141a15-20). Aristotle remarks in Book VI that philosophers, such as Anaxagoras or Thales, were wise in this regard, since they possessed "a knowledge that is rare, marvellous, difficult and even superhuman". Philosophical knowledge about e.g. the sun, stars, and planets is 'useless', in the sense that philosophers "do not seek to know the things that are good for human beings" (NE 1141b5-8). 'Uselessness' is, however, not necessarily a bad thing. In the *Politics*, Aristotle remarks that "to seek for utility everywhere is entirely unsuited to men that are great-souled and free" (Pol. 1338b1). For Aristotle, the life of a philosopher, who had leisure to desinterestingly contemplate the divine and eternal nature of the celestial bodies, was itself the most god-like. Theory is only 'useful' for happiness in the sense that its exercise *constitutes* happiness (NE 1179a33).

Aristotle makes a distinction between the happiness that such wise men can achieve through contemplation, and an inferior kind of happiness that is to be found through leading a virtuous life in one's political community. A life dedicated to philosophy is completely self-sufficient, while practicing the virtues always involves a struggle against inclinations that need to be controlled and obstacles in society that need to be taken into account (Hadot, 1995, pp. 88-89). Most people have to opt for a virtuous life in the *polis*, which is still a good but second-best option. In Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle contrasts philosophical wisdom with practical wisdom, which is concerned with the affairs of men, and with things that are the object of deliberation. We 'deliberate' about things that are not eternal and divine, but admit of change, such as the contingencies of everyday life. Deliberation is 'useful' because it helps us to think about how we can realise a good life, a life that is not merely sublime, but that can actually be attained. Following Daniel Russell (2009, p. 82), we could call practical wisdom "the virtue of

deliberation”. When we deliberate with ourselves and others, this leads to, as Gadamer (1986, pp. 36-37) calls it, “reasonableness” or “well-advised-ness”. Being reasonable means that one looks for good reasons that can support a decision. This matters to virtue ethics, as virtues are not simply mindless habit that produces behaviour, but *intelligent* dispositions that involve a choice to do or feel certain things in ways that observe a mean between two vicious extremes (Annas, 2011).

Dialectic and philosophy are both after some kind of truth. But, a dialectician is, just as a rhetorician, looking for a kind of assent from an audience one is addressing, while a philosopher is in search of ‘the best arguments available’, even if they are less convincing to a particular audience (Smith, 2001, pp. 13-14). ‘Assent’ matters because the goal of a dialectician is to establish *agreement* between discussants about a problem that arises from questioning general beliefs. Philosophers, by contrast, pursue the “disinterested discovery of the truth” to their own satisfaction (Smith, 2001, p. 14). People who conduct dialogues have an interest in the topic and care about whether they manage to convince someone to change his life. This means that dialogues about the good life require mutual well-wishing between discussants. The discussion partners can best be seen as ‘critical friends’, who are, on the one hand, not so critical that they destroy each other, and are, on the other hand, not friendly in the sense that they agree with everything that is said and done. They are critical *because* they care about each other’s well-being. For example, Socrates was concerned with convincing his interlocutors to change their lives for the better. In the *Apology*, Socrates compared himself to a gadfly that kept the “large and well bred” horse (the city of Athens) awake by stinging it. Aristotle has the same practical goal: the purpose of moral inquiry is, he wrote, not to “know what virtue is, but to become good” (NE 1103b27–29). The ‘truth’ that Aristotle is after in the *Ethics* is the *practical* truth of wanting to make the audience good through a cooperative process that both parties consent to (Smith, 2001, p. 16).

From the comparison of dialogue and philosophy, I conclude that Aristotle treats the philosophical life, a life characterised by contemplation, as the best, most honourable life humans are capable of. I think that his project in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* was mainly dedicated to trying to help the already well-educated students who attended his Lyceum to understand better what it means to live a virtuous life in the Athenian state. They are the ‘generous youths’ about whom Aristotle writes that theories do have power to stimulate and

encourage them. By questioning each other about how a virtuous life can best be lived, working their way through and assessing the consistency of the most authoritative opinions, they can develop the virtue of deliberation. This benefits them individually and collectively, as this practical wisdom is also needed to make laws and deliberate in parliament in order to reach decisions (NE 1141b23-28). These two conclusions, however, raise a puzzle. Does the separation between the theoretical life and the ethical life in a community imply that Aristotle does not take the philosophical search for truth an appropriate method for students in political science?

The relationship between practical and theoretical wisdom in Aristotle's work is too complex to do justice to here (see Baehr, 2012). The solution chosen here is to fuse the distinction somehow by taking a developmental perspective. Kristjánsson (2014a, p. 8) argues that we should keep in mind that when Aristotle describes contemplation as the highest activity for human beings, he is thinking of people who are already living morally virtuous lives and have a fully-developed capacity for practical reason. Although Kristjánsson does not state this explicitly, he suggests that practical wisdom is *developmentally prior* to theoretical wisdom. If this makes sense, and if we treat dialogue as the method that primarily stimulates practical wisdom, we can conclude that dialogue is *educationally prior* to philosophy. Dialogues can make us wonder, with which philosophy begins, but this is, in Aristotle's view, not the whole story about our intellectual development. What does this mean for present-day approaches that recommend conducting 'philosophical' dialogues in the classroom? If philosophy is only a suitable aim for students when they have reached a very high level of moral maturity, some approaches to dialogue in the classroom seem to be too 'theoretical' in order to be a useful element of Aristotelian character education. Aristotle warns the masses about taking recourse to merely discussing instead of practicing virtue, which makes them "fancy that they are pursuing philosophy and that this will make them good men." (NE1105b12-15). Without the antecedent development of moral character, wisdom will not be of advantage to those who pursue it.

6. Conclusion: critical character education?

As we are looking for a dialogue method that contributes to a *critical* kind of character education, we finally need to address the question whether dialogue, as part of an Aristotelian character education project, can make students' more critical. But before we answer that question, let us reflect at what our explorations have yielded so far. When examining Lickona's

work from the early 1990s, we concluded that he treated ‘moral knowledge’ as one of three components of character, and recommended several strategies that teachers can use to talk with students about moral issues in the classroom. If Lickona is representative of the character education movement in the 1990s, the critique that the methods employed by character education are indoctrinative is misplaced. While critics may be right that habituation, role modelling and story telling can be understood as a form of mindless inculcation, they are wrong in believing that they are or have to be. Moreover, these critics have overlooked the fact that character educationalists have offered dialogue strategies, and have even appealed to Kohlberg’s cognitive developmental approach to justify this. This is, however, character education’s Achilles’ heel as it raises the question whether character education has a separate dialogue method of its own. Therefore, we examined what Aristotle, as the founding father of virtue ethics, had to say about dialogue by consulting the content of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and by looking at two of his works on logic: the *Rhetoric* and *Topics*. From this examination we concluded that dialogue was part and parcel of Aristotle’s oeuvre and the way he taught at the Lyceum, but that is not *exclusively* Aristotelian, as Aristotle incorporated Socrates’ and Plato’s intellectual legacy into his own approach.

By comparing dialectic to rhetoric, scientific demonstration and philosophy, we tried to paint a fuller picture of the meaning and use of dialectic, the art of conducting dialogues, as part of Aristotelian character education. We saw that dialogues depart from ‘truths’, i.e. premises that are generally accepted by the most wise and respected people in a community. Reasoning from authoritative opinions admits of more doubt than scientific proof, a problem that can be alleviated by not taking these opinions for granted but precisely by subjecting them to a critical scrutiny by using a strict dialectical method. The inconsistencies this amounts to can make us wonder, with which all philosophy *begins*, but which is, in Aristotle’s view, not the whole story. Philosophers, who contemplate the good life in a disinterested and ‘useless’ way, are after more sophisticated, explicit or reflective truths about the good life that practically wise people who are concerned with the application of these truths to the situation he or she is in. Questions are ‘critical’ in the sense that there is a standard – the conviction that there is typical way for humans to live and flourish – which can be appealed to in order to reveal inconsistencies that prompt interlocutors to continue their open-ended quest for the good life. Interlocutors do not use clever sophisticated tricks to win an argument, but submit their moral commitments to the test by saying

what they really believe. Nailing one's colours to the mast presupposes an atmosphere of safety, trust, well-wishing cooperation and truthfulness. Critical questions are not asked in order to damage someone, but with the intent to help each other on their way towards realising a flourishing life.

Is this account of dialogue critical enough to satisfy critics such as Kohn and Nash in the 1990s and Siegel, more recently? The answer to this question hinges on the question what one understands by 'critical' (see Sanderson, 2015b, pp. 7-9). In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle often uses the dialectical method himself to enumerate the opinions of the many and the wise, pointing out contradictions that require further thought. Aristotle's appeal to the authoritative opinions in his community means that he thought from 'inside human practices', that is, from the perspective and the normative standards that his experienced fellow-citizens already implicitly used (Eikeland, 2008, p. 31). Transposed to our time, this means that Aristotle is interested in *us*, in how *we* can think through and clarify our lives – not as disengaged spectators but as engaged actors, extracting from our (prejudiced) experiences intrinsic standards of living well. Ethical inquiries can do justice to the perspectives from within practices *and* be critical when practitioners make explicit the moral assumptions implicit in their lives in order to ask whether what they take to be good reasons really are good reasons.

Alasdair MacIntyre (1966, p. 2), one of the first and staunchest advocates of the idea that moral ideas are always embodied in and partly constitutive of social life forms, is often mistakenly depicted as a communitarian who thinks that everything that practices or communities hold as right and good is right and good. It is, he writes, "a mistake to suppose that there is anything good about local communities as such" (MacIntyre, 1999, p. 142). In his view, the face-to-face encounters and dialogues in relatively small communities are only valuable to the extent that they support people to participate in ongoing conversation about the good life. Communities are, to use a metaphor, vehicles that ideally support people to spend their lives looking for the good life, but that can be abandoned when they do not fulfil that task anymore, for example because they have become prejudiced, narrow-minded or complacent. Traditions, the historical arguments about the good life within a community, cannot only be conservative, but need to be characterised by openness and transformation as well in order to be meaningful to people living in a different time and place. Aristotelian virtue ethics is itself an excellent example of such a tradition.

It has to be admitted, however, that ‘critical conventions’ and ‘open-minded traditions’ do still not allow for an Archimedean point, a perspective that can be used to judge these traditions from the outside, such as Kohlberg’s (or Rawls’) universal principles of justice. We see this in the way that MacIntyre (1999, p. 154) reacts to the suggestion that radical criticism means that someone has to completely ‘step outside the circle’ of commitments, e.g. to a particular set of virtues. In his view, people who want to know how to live well do not have to separate themselves entirely from all their prior beliefs, commitments and relationships, because such relationships, in particular friends, are precisely needed to make us account for ourselves. Our friends’ critical questions may want us to criticise, revise or even reject many of our relationships and institutions, but not *all*, as this would precisely undermine the condition necessary for becoming critical. I hope this account of the relationship between critical thinking and social forms of life is convincing to virtue ethicists, but I am less certain that it will satisfy liberal philosophers, who will, when it comes to the practicalities of conducting dialogues in the classroom, prefer to draw on Kohlberg’s moral dilemma discussions. We have seen now that from a virtue ethical perspective, moral development is not about moving from conventional to post-conventional morality, but from uncritical to critical membership of conventions. As Aristotle and Socrates agreed about this, the question that could be explored in more depth is not whether dialogue is a Socratic or an Aristotelian method of education for moral character (Kristjánsson, 2014b), but rather the question of how we can combine the wisdom of Socrates and Aristotle to design new forms of dialogue that make students critical, but not from a view from nowhere.

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