



A CULTIVATION OF PHRONESIS THROUGH "UPBUILDING EXAMPLES"

Stein Wivestad

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Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT United Kingdom

T: +44 (0) 121 414 3602 F: +44 (0) 121 414 4865

E: jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk W: www.jubileecentre.ac.uk



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Some years ago I established a research group, which develops a free database on the internet www.oppbyggeligeksempler.no. It is in Norwegian (I'm sorry! Try Google Translate, even if it sometimes is misleading). The project is in progress, and it is important to clarify its aim and goals, and to continue deliberating on the choice of means. Therefore, I appreciate the theme and setting of this conference, and the chance to present a paper. I will be very happy to get comments and proposals.

The task of the project is to select and describe what I have called "upbuilding examples", edifying examples, in different types of art works. The aim is to make accessible pictures, films, music and texts that can help us (adults) to struggle with ourselves in order to become better models for the next generation. Adults should "be able to deliberate finely ... about what promotes living well in general" (Aristotle, 1985, 1140a26-28)¹. All adults who have relations with children *are* models for the younger generation – for better or for worse. The only responsible reaction is to ask: how can we become better? However, "do we actually know what 'better' looks like?" (Mollenhauer, 2014, p. 2). In all cultures and at all times, upbringing of children, with formal education as an eventual part of the task, is a central aspect of what promotes living well. Therefore, *all* adults, not only those who have a professional relation with children, ought to continue the struggle with themselves to become better human beings (Wivestad, 2013a). Character education "should ideally be seen as a lifelong process", and development of general *phronesis* – general moral wisdom and practical judgement –

¹ Bekker numbers below without other information refer to Irwin's translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, 1985).

is logically prior to eventual applications within specific areas of professional practice (Kristjánsson, 2015, pp. 16, 87).

The main sources of my understanding of *phronesis* and upbuilding are some of the writings of Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas and Søren Kierkegaard. Why does the project focus on "upbuilding examples" as means to a cultivation of *phronesis*? Abstract arguments can wait. Let us begin with some particular works of art.

TWO "UPBUILDING EXAMPLES"

Please listen to [this music](#) (Bach, 1731) for some minutes. What are your associations? Then I invite you to study this [painting](#) (Rembrandt, 1668). What are your impressions of the persons in the picture and the relation between them?

EXAMPLES MOVE US MORE THAN WORDS

This is a true story, told by a person who is now the leader of a doctor's office: Jan Helge grew up on a small farm in the Western part of Norway. When he was three years old, his parents sent him to the nearest hospital because he limped. At the hospital, they found nothing wrong. The boy came home and continued to limp, but after some time, the limping disappeared by itself. What could be the explanation? Three generations were living together on this small farm, and the grandparents had most time to be with the children. The little boy used to follow his grandfather closely, and the grandfather limped because of arthrosis in his hip.

The story exemplifies how the feelings and actions of children might be influenced by the example we give them. Thomas Aquinas contends: "In human actions and emotions, where experience is most important, examples move us more than words / *magis movent exempla quam verba*" (Aquinas, 1272/2012, I-II 34,1 co., my transl.). Examples can move us; especially the examples of people we admire or people with whom we identify ourselves.

ADULTS MAY CULTIVATE *PHRONESIS* THROUGH DIALOGUE AND *MIMESIS*

Phronesis has a basis in a natural capacity, which Aristotle calls *deinotēs*, cleverness. It means "to be able to do the actions that tend to promote whatever goal is assumed and to achieve it" (Aristotle, 1985, 1144a24). This is an amoral capacity: a gift that may help us to attain both good and bad goals. As newborn, our feelings determine our goals, and habits are established.

During childhood and youth, we transform our habits by *energeia*, our being-at-work, the function we have got as human beings. Every time we see an end, think about means to it and choose an action, we learn to hold ourselves in certain ways, i.e. we build specific *hexeis*, active conditions for certain feelings and actions (Sachs, 2002, p. xvi). Habits then become "like nature" (1152a33), a kind of second nature. As adults, we are morally responsible for all our habits – both good and bad ones. A "habit is easier than nature to change", but this second nature "is also difficult to change" (1152a32). Undergoing many particular experiences "of the actions in life" (1095a3), we may be prepared for systematic ethical and political studies, but it is crucial that we have built up good *hexeis*, i.e. virtues. If our feelings are *not* infused by reason and we become used to living by our feelings, then arguments will easily be ignored. "For it is impossible, or not easy, to alter by argument what has long been absorbed by habit" (1179b18). Aristotle thinks that most people live by their

feelings. Good laws and legal systems may prevent the worst actions, but this is not sufficient for what promotes our living well in general.

To grasp what *phronesis* is, we should first study the sort of people we call *phronimos* (1140a25). In order to determine the mean between too much and too little in actions and emotions, we ought to follow the *logos*, the reason, as expressed in the example and advice of those we recognize as *phronimoi*, morally wise persons (1107a3). If possible, we should choose friends who are *phronimoi*. Friends can function as "mirrors in which we see ourselves reflected" (Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 124), and friends may "throw themselves into challenging conversations in order to help each other see more ample and appropriate ways of being, feeling and acting ... In other words, dialogue is the essential medium or method of the most advanced form of character education" (p. 125). Friends who help each other are positive examples. Negative examples are important as well, for instance characters we may experience in plays, like King Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone*. His family dies because he will not listen to arguments. The chorus sums up how this can be a warning to us: "The great words of arrogant men have to make repayment with great blows, and in old age teach wisdom [to *phronein*]" (Sophocles, 1891, 1344–1347).

From the very beginning, children learn through *mimesis*, creative imitation, emulation. The human being as a rational animal discriminates between true and false, good and bad. But the human being "is also the most mimetic one" among the animals, with a natural capacity "to make the self and the other alike" (Scaramuzza, 2016, p. 249). We (adults) can to some extent, but less well than children, learn by "letting the other live in ourselves" (p. 249). In addition to the "the essence that makes humans able to *discriminate*" we should cultivate "the essence that makes humans able to *become similar*" (p. 250) through a "creative *mirroring*" that "captures the universal in the particular" (p. 254). This is what happens when we open ourselves for an encounter with a work of art. We "assimilate" something that is foreign, by taking it into ourselves, trying to recognize ourselves in the alien: "a person who understands, understands himself, projecting himself according to his possibilities" (Gadamer, 1965/1979, pp. 15, 231). German and Scandinavian languages have an expression that seems to be lacking in English: "Sich auf etwas verstehen". For instance, "wer sich auf ein Handwerk versteht" (Gadamer, 1965, p. 246) is someone who knows *oneself* through a trade. An English translation says merely that the person is someone "who knows a trade" (Gadamer, 1965/1979, p. 231). When we really understand something, we understand it by anticipating a possible future for ourselves.

A CHRISTIAN AND AN ARISTOTELIAN UNDERSTANDING OF *EUDAIMONIA*

Probably in 1846, nine years before he died, Søren Aabye Kierkegaard chose a hymn verse for his gravestone (Garff, 2005, pp. 810–811). Kierkegaard's family grave is located in the Assistens Kirkegård (cemetery) in Copenhagen and the hymn verse² is engraved below the information about Søren's birth and death:

² "Det er en liden Tid ..." is verse 10 (of 12 verses) in the hymn "Halleluja, jeg har min Jesum funden", published by Hans Adolph Brorson in 1739. Kierkegaard used to go to church and was especially interested in the hymns (Garff, 2005, Part Two, 1845, Kierkegaard in Church, p. 330). The melody to Brorson's hymn was composed in 1796 by H. O. C. Zink to "Nu rinder solen op". The melody dictates the repetition of the seventh line.



A little time in life
and I've succeeded.
Swift the entire strife
will be concluded.
Then I can rest in peace
in halls of roses.
Incessantly with ease
Incessantly with ease
commune with Jesus.
(my transl.)

In a comment to his own writings, Kierkegaard says: "one does not reflect oneself into being Christian, one reflects oneself out of other [positions] in order to become Christian"³ (Kierkegaard, 1859/2013, vol. 16, p. 72, my translation). He was a master of dialectic reflection, but his witness about the ultimate *telos* of life, the best life for human beings is very simple: "What is decisive is that with God everything is possible ... the critical decision does not come until a person is brought to his extremity, when, humanly speaking, there is no possibility. Then the question is whether he will believe that for God everything is possible, that is whether he will *believe*"⁴ (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 38). This witness may offend Aristotelians who think it possible to attain a "harmonious mastery of one's *whole* life" (Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 97). The Aristotelian ideal is the virtuous adult who makes himself as manly (*virtus*), strong and divine as possible in this life (1177b38), and eventually, after a "complete life", can be declared "blessed and happy", *makarios* and *eudaimon* (1098a19-20). *Eudaimonia* "by its etymology suggests 'having a good *daimon*' (divine spirit, translated 'god')" (Aristotle, 1985, Irwin's Glossary, p. 405). In the gospel, the trusting child is put forward as a model for the adults, and the ultimate end of life is understood as communion with Jesus in heaven. "Blessed (*makarioi*) are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (NRSV, 1989, Matthew 5:8).

EXISTENTIAL SOUL-SEARCHING FOR ADULTS

Phronesis has an "*integrative* function" (Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 96). In order to promote "living well in general", it is therefore necessary for "*phronesis* to be informed by a general *blueprint* of the good; a consciously accessible, comprehensive and systematic – if also flexible and open-textured – conception of what makes a human life prosper" (p. 112). This integrated understanding of the good life, is in NE Book 1 related to "the soul's activity that ... requires reason [as obeying reason]" (1198a8) in our moral and political life. In Book 10, however, this good life is clearly subordinated to a life of "complete happiness". The latter "would be superior to the human level" in so far as the human being "has some divine element in him" (1177b25-28). One who is theoretically wise, *sophos*, "is most loved by the gods. And it is likely that this same person will be happiest" (1179a30-32). In the mirroring or contemplation of *kosmos*, the "reality as a *whole* ... the reality of all that

³ "man reflekterer sig ikke ind i det at være Christen, men ud af Andet for at blive Christen"

⁴ " Det Afgjørende er: for Gud er Alt muligt. ... Afgjørelsen er først, naar Mennesket er bragt til det Yderste, saa der menneskelig talt ingen Mulighed er. Da gjælder det, om han vil troe, at for Gud er Alt muligt, det er, om han vil troe." (Kierkegaard, 1849/2006, bd. 11, p. 153).

exists", we may understand ourselves in relation to what "grounds reality and provides it with its fundamental organizing structure, and hence its ultimate meaning, purpose and direction ... the ultimate order-of-things" (Wright, 2007, p. 21). If so, the blueprint of the good life is only a part of an even more comprehensive whole.

This seems to correspond to Kristjánsson's interpretation of Book 10. "Pure contemplation activates the most divine, continuous, self-sufficient, noble, intrinsically valuable and leisurely elements within us: the elements that are most 'us'". However, he will not give priority to contemplative activity, because "generosity, courage and compassion" is more needed in a world of "conflicts and misfortune" (Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 109). I agree with this description of the world today, but I think that the situation could have been described in equal terms at the time of Aristotle. So, we may wonder why he gave contemplation priority.

Many have discussed the tension between NE Book 1 and 10. Trond Berg Eriksen (1976) has contrasted Werner Jaeger's and Fritz Wehrli's interpretation of the relation between ethics and theoretical knowledge in Plato and Aristotle. According to Wehrli, Aristotle created an understanding of human activity based on experiences that were independent of cosmic and metaphysical speculation. Thus the Platonic connection between the life of contemplation and the life of action was broken. Jaeger, on the other side, contends that Aristotle "holds fast to the significance of intellectual cultivation and knowledge for the moral culture of the personality. ... The primacy of the theoretical over the practical reason is his enduring Platonic conviction" (cited in Eriksen, 1976, pp. 203–204). Eriksen endorses both views, with this qualification: "Jaeger describes Aristotle's intentions whereas Wehrli depicts the actual outcome" in Aristotle's literary work (p. 204).

Kristjánsson seems to follow Aristotle's intentions when he argues for adult "self-reform through moral emulation and philosophical contemplation" (Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 115), a painful "existential soul-searching" with some help from a "suitable exemplar" (p. 114). It is painful, because our weaknesses will be revealed. Transformative forces for self-change could be "moral exemplars ... literature that can challenge ... prevailing self-conceptions ... and ... critical dialogues about the purpose and meaning of life" (p. 116). He advocates the use of "art and literature" (p. 142). Visual art and films could have been mentioned as well. Kristjánsson goes further in this direction in an article about an "enchanted" human flourishing: *evdaimonia* should include "considerable elements of emotional awe" (Kristjánsson, 2016, p. 711), awe towards "the workings of the universe — the singularity of a black hole; the possibility of endless parallel worlds" (p. 713). The article starts with a story about a man who wants "to be united with something higher than himself" (p. 709). Such a wish seems to be relevant to many who experience what Charles Taylor calls the "terrible flatness in the everyday" of the consumer society (p. 710). Kristjánsson opens for studies of "the great classic works of Western art, most of which have been inspired by theistic beliefs", but thinks that this should be understood, not as spiritual education, but "within the remit of any good moral or character education" (p. 717). This implies the use of stories and music from a religious context to enrich our ordinary human reasoning – not to challenge it. An "enchanted flourishing" may appeal to the generation who enjoys the magic of Harry Potter, but will it be a real a quest for truth when works of art inspired by theistic belief are interpreted exclusively for moral purposes? Is it possible to give credibility to "selves-transcending ideals" (p. 718) within an immanent frame? Does "enchanted flourishing" presuppose an instrumentalization of awe, placing human thinking in the position of a god?

Aristotle says: "We ought not to follow the proverb-writers, and 'think human because you are human', or 'think mortal, since you are mortal'. Rather, as far as we can, we ought to be pro-immortal, and go to all lengths to live a life that expresses our supreme element" (1177b35-1178a1). We want good reasons, good grounds, but what is the ground of our grounds? How can we come to "den Grund der Gründe", the basis on which we ground the reasons that can make the projections of our life and future meaningful (Mollenhauer, 1985, p. 173)? One of the five truth-seeking active conditions (*hexeis*) in NE Book 6 is called "understanding", *nous* (1139b18). It is "concerned with the last things, and in both directions. For there is understanding, not a rational account, about the first terms and the last" (1143a36). If you posit *cogito ergo sum* as your first term, you may doubt everything except yourself. If you posit *credo ergo sum*, "as you believe, so you are" (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 93), you may first of all doubt yourself and your own capacities. That position "is necessary to avoid false pride" (Wivestad, 2011, p. 623). In that position you can get out of the illusion that the self, which actively chooses and forms yourself, is above reproach.

Kierkegaard understands the human self as "a relation that relates itself to itself ... a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis", which "relates itself to that which established the entire relation" (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 13). If there is an eternal element in my soul, and if I cannot fully overcome myself *by* myself, how should I struggle with myself? How should I proceed in my existential soul-searching?

WHAT CAN BUILD US UP AS HUMAN BEINGS?

The last words in the work *Either/Or* are these:

Ask yourself and keep on asking until you find the answer ... only the deep inner motion, only the heart's indescribable emotion, only that will convince you that what you have acknowledged belongs to you, that no power can take it from you – for only the truth that builds up is truth for you. (Kierkegaard, 1843/1987, Part II, p. 354)

In order to live in truth, I have to live in a passionate way. Ethical and religious decisions involve the whole person, and demand intense personal engagement (Grøn, 1994, p. 20). What I choose to love with all my soul will be "engraved", *charattein*, in my soul: it forms my character. If I primarily love myself, I can still be acceptable by outward standards. I see Rembrandt's presentation of the brother who stayed at home as a "mirror". I may have a strong and good character and be able to control my feelings and always behave well. However, I can be filled with envy and disgust, when a person who deserves punishment, receives love. I ask myself: Is such love compatible with justice? In Rembrandt's painting, the walking stick of the good son marks a barrier – between him and the bad one who returned in misery – and the father who loved both sons.

The texts of Kierkegaard invite each particular unique reader to a direct confrontation with the text in order to become aware of the reader's own life experiences, seeking for truths that may correct and improve active conditions for action. Our "house of life" is difficult to build up, and easy to tear down. Kierkegaard understands education as "upbuilding", with unconditional love as the fundament and the fundamental power (Kierkegaard, 1847/1995). Upbuilding should *not* be understood as a type of technical formation where the helping friend is seen as a master who is honored by the reader's development. What builds up are gifts that the helper has received and pass on (Wivestad,

2011, p. 620). The upbuilding happens outside the knowledge and control of the helper (Wivestad, 2013b, p. 521).

Three stages in a program for upbuilding:

1. Examine the fundament: Know yourself! 2. Overcome contradictions and confusion: Receive life as gifts! 3. Struggle patiently with yourself: Love your neighbour as yourself!

1. The first stage examines the fundament of the "house". It is decisive to get a true picture of oneself in the world. For centuries, many have tried to build up their "house" on a fundament of scientific, technological and economic development. In our striving to possess the world, we have desired the external, temporal and imperfect. However, "when a person only wants to be external, secular, temporal, then are the world and temporality unconditionally more powerful than he" (Kierkegaard, 1990, p. 165). Experiences of consequences like pollution, oppression, wars and dangers of atomic war confirm Kierkegaard's principle: "The world can be possessed only by its possessing me" (p. 164). This threatens the stability of the fundament. If the soul, which is a relation between the eternal and temporal, is possessed by the temporal world, one's soul becomes "the contradiction of the temporal and the eternal" (p. 163), not an integrated whole. The more power we get, the worse are the possible consequences. We may learn from Goethe's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (lively staged in Disney's *Fantasia*), Chaplin's *Modern Times*, oppressions through New Public Management, and a series of political "saviours" who have promised to fix the problems of the people. The combination of good intentions, bad means and power is dangerous. While packing his lunch box, with a picture of Darth Vader on the front, a six years old boy told his mother: "I want to kill Donald Trump." Living temporally in Washington, D.C. and spiritually in the *Star Wars*' universe, Trump to him was a "bad guy" who had to be stopped. Possessed by his feelings, he opposed himself to moral principles that he had learned from his mother. More dangerous are "boys" with power. Many works of art can contribute to give us a realistic understanding of our contradictory and insecure situation in the world. The lack of a firm foundation generates doubt and anxiety.

2. The challenge of the second stage is to face doubt and anxiety in a good way. It is futile to enter an impatient quest for what is new, or a persistent search for pleasure and power. That will fill our "house" with confusion or a constant fear of failure. What may help in this stage is to unveil and resist the doubt that doubts everything except one's own doubt. Insight in the limitations of one's own wisdom opens for an understanding of life as undeserved gifts. If I use Rembrandt's painting as a mirror, I recognize myself in the position of the son who returned home.

3. The third stage is a patient and lifelong struggle with myself to avoid false pride and haughtiness, a struggle against my propensity to live as an egoistic "troll". Peer Gynt wanted to be a self, but in reality he had been "to himself enough" until he met his true self through Solveig's faith, hope and love (Ibsen, 1867/2008). When we receive gifts that we do not deserve, we are encouraged to *Pay it forward!* (Leder, 2001). I hear Bach's Largo as a well-balanced and creative "dance" of voices, which imitate and complement each other – encouraging us to move in similar ways in our relation with others.

We express ourselves in our acts: "the final end is present in everything one does" and "each good moral act is related as an integral part of a whole, or as individual tones within the larger melody of one's life" (Schockenhoff, 2002, pp. 244, 245). Both Kierkegaard and Thomas Aquinas define sin as

disorder of our integrity. Living a good life implies that our life, our “house”, comes in order. This is a process where we may see God as working through good upbringing, human traditions, virtues and reasons in all people, agnostics and atheists as well. However, there is a difference between what Aquinas calls “theological virtues”, faith, hope and unconditional love, and the classical moral virtues of temperance, courage and justice: “... virtutibus theologicis homo ordinatur ad Deum, temperantia vero et fortitudine ad seipsum, iustitia autem ad proximum” (Aquinas, 1272/2012, I-II 72,4 co). The human being has three relations: “ad seipsum”, to oneself, “ad proximum”, to one’s neighbour, and “ad Deum”, to God. If I attain proper temperance or self-control plus fortitude or courage, I come in order with myself. Through justice, I come in order with those who are close to me: family, neighbours and others who I depend on and are dependent on me. “Justitia ... ad proximum” could even include the animals and the whole nature. Through faith, hope and unconditional love my life comes in order in relation with God. Each relation has its specific challenges, but the relation to oneself is part of the relation with the neighbour, and both these relations are part of the relation with God. *Phronesis* enlightens our actions in the first two relations. Unconditional love, *agape*, may guide our actions in all three relations (Wivestad, 2008, p. 308).

Many adults are confused in their encounter with children and youth, and ask for prescriptions: “what shall I do with the children?” I think it is more important to focus on one’s own pattern of living and the possibilities of improvement of one’s own active conditions for action: “how can I move away from my vices and improve my virtues?” This can be done in many ways, but one possible way could be to gather in small groups of adults, where the starting point for dialogue could be examples of literature, pictures, films and music that appeal both to the head and to the heart. I have discussed this in an article with the title “Upbuilding examples for adults close to children” (Wivestad, 2013b), and the ideas in this article have been seminal for our project in progress: the development of a free database on the internet that can help groups of adults to choose relevant works of art to study.

Art works (literature, pictures, films, music) that we want to include in the database, should be well crafted and have these possibilities:

1. The work may help us to become aware of how we actually are, and how our situation in the world is contradictory and insecure.
2. The work may help us to avoid absolute trust in something or someone that does not deserve absolute trust; help us see life as good gifts; gifts we do not deserve.
3. The work may help us see others without hatred, envy or egoistic calculation; help us to share freely the good gifts that we have received.

In our database project, we search for art works, which meet these criteria, and we would be thankful to get ideas from you. Critical questions to the ideas behind the project are very welcome as well!

I see a cultivation of *phronesis* as a part of the upbuilding towards ultimate *eudaimonia*, a flourishing that “would be superior to the human level” (1177b27). It is not necessary to see it in this way. A cultivation of *phronesis* through upbuilding examples can probably contribute to any good moral or character education. However, the point of upbuilding examples is to open possibilities for being built up on the fundament and with the power that really can lead to the ultimate end: being united

with something higher than ourselves. The database will therefore include works and recommend themes for dialogue that have this end in view. We challenge adults to study upbuilding examples in a passionate, truth-seeking way. Those who let themselves be built up might see that good lives for all human beings are lives that – in infinite different variations – have a single unifying *telos*: friendship with God, communion with Christ.

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