Aristotle's Moral Ecology: Teaching, Seeking, and Catching the Virtues

Ryan Olson

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Ryan S. Olson
University of Virginia (Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture)
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Three primary means of forming character—being taught, learning from chosen experiences and activities, and absorbing the expectations and ideals of one's environments—depend upon a person's relationships with others. Virtually none of the character education strategies identified by the Jubilee Centre's "Teaching Character Education" report involve merely solitary action: all require policies, organisations, leaders, educators, peers, technologies, parents, coaches, clergy, civic organizations, citizens, shared lexical agreements, and a host of other coordinators (Arthur et al. 2022). This finding reflects the neo-Aristotelian approach's identification of a deeper structure of human nature and human formation into which Aristotle tapped: formation happens in a *world*, not a singular environment.

The late modern world, with its influences bombarding students in myriad ways (Kingsnorth 2025; Archer 2012; Rosa 2015; Haidt 2024; Davis 2020), reminds educators that character formation is significantly complicated by the dynamics of the social world. A text, however insightful, cannot be expected to give us a world. Are there clues in Aristotle's texts about the world in which the virtues are formed and how to account for its dynamics? Can other sources fill out the picture? To get the template of the world, I draw on the sociology of morality; to derive the world of virtue ethical formation, I use the field of classics (my own discipline).

The formation of virtue is a relational endeavor. Martha Nussbaum, for example, argues that '[e]ach of the human excellences requires some external resources and necessary conditions. Each also requires, more intimately, external objects that will receive the excellent activity' (2001, 343). Invoking the social context of virtue, we often think of Aristotle's account of friendship, which 'extends and redefines the boundaries of the good life in such a way that my happiness or complete good comes to include the happiness of significant others' (Sherman 1989, 128). Talbot Brewer elaborates:

> Aristotle seems to have thought that the most optimal arrangement would be to have one's characteristic affects…shaped within the context of a properly constituted civic *philia* between ruler and ruled. If we doubt or despair of this possibility, we might still hope to foster such love within smaller and more intimate circles of *philia*, including relations between parents and children, among close-knit neighbors, or within what we moderns call friendships. The fundamental and quite plausible idea here is that love of the good is fostered and refined only insofar as one's socialization is guided by one or more intimates who have themselves attained at least an intimation of the human good (2011, 269–70).

The mechanisms by which one's character grows through friendship have been helpfully specified by Kristjansson as emotional (especially mutual trust), linguistic/cognitive (esp. critical discussion), and epistemological (esp. self-knowledge developed with the friend as another self)

(2022, 122–26). Such texts describe, as Aristotle himself did, the nature of relationships as determined by their context, whether in the family (relations between parents and children or among siblings), in the political community, in a mentor-mentee relationship, among online users, and so on. These contexts modulate expectations and behaviors. Likewise, the institutions of society define the nature, potential, and scope of relationships. Aristotle begins the *Politics* with an account of institutions that form the backdrop of a *polis*. 'Aristotle [rests solidarity] upon the unification of expanding circles of loyalty which mediate between the atomic individual and the molecular state' (Price 1997, 200), especially those forged through marriage, fraternities, common sacrifices, and shared activities (*Pol.* 1280b36-38, (Price 1997, 200).

Each of these bonds gets forged within an institution constituted by norms, laws, values, social conventions, and ideals (von Reden and Kowalzig 2022). One important text is *Nicomachean Ethics* X.9. Aristotle assumes that the virtuous person must be properly educated and trained (τραφῆναι καλῶς … καὶ ἐθισθῆναι, 1180a15). She must continue in virtue by following habits and being regulated/guided by a right order (τάξιν ὀρθήν, 1180a18) with sufficient sanctions (ἔχουσαν ἰσχύν). Aristotle doubts the adequacy of a father's authority, or that of any individual, except a ruler. But he has great confidence in law (νόμος) because it has a compulsory force (ἀναγκαστικὴν ἔχει δύναμιν, 1180a21). Aristotle does allow that when ethical formation and regulation are ignored by a community (κοινῇ), a person's duty (δόξειεν ἂν προσήκειν) is to assist his children and friends in forming virtue (τοῖς σφετέροις τέκνοις καὶ φίλοις εἰς ἀρετὴν συμβάλλεσθαι, 1180a31-32). Important persons hover in the background: parents (cf. 1161a16-20), friends, rulers (cf. 1161a10-15), legislators, teachers, and community members. Each of these actors, in turn, emerges from, and is supported by, institutions: domestic arrangements (e.g., οἱ πατρικοὶ λόγοι καὶ τὰ ἔθη, 1180b5), social structures of association, the state (ταῖς πόλεσιν ἐνισχύει τὰ νόμιμα καὶ τὰ ἤθη, 1180b4), legislative bodies, educational provision, and so on. In effect, Aristotle suggests that the *sociology of morality* may be decisive. In contemporary social science, we have called this web of institutions and norms a *moral ecology* (Ober 2015, 21–70).

Recent developments in the sociology of morality suggest that 'religions, occupations, generations, educational categories, organizations, and social movements can all have their own moralities'. Moral sharing across differences does exist, but 'at many cross-cutting and competing levels', pointing to the decisive import of 'norms and values, narratives, identities, institutions, symbolic boundaries, and cognitive schemas' (Hitlin and Vaisey 2013, 53–54). Out of such communities emerge *thick understandings* of the moral life (Abend 2011), with *moral typologies* held in institutional settings that bring about significant moral differences that change over time as a result of historical influences (Bellah et al. 1985; Hunter 2000); the social world (Joas 2000); culture (Lukes 2008); geographic location and social position (Lamont et al. 1996); and the interactions of these. Not only are these *sources* important, but understanding *motivations* also obtains: moral reasoning and moral intuitions often conflict; resolutions come through 'participation in…complexes [of customs]' (Haidt 2001). Rarely do 'meaningful cognitions…ultimately guide social behavior' through 'values and norms'; the mechanism that guides behavior, instead, is 'emotional…[as] individuals monitor others' attitudes to social coalitions…by feeling the amount of confidence and enthusiasm there is toward certain leaders and activities, [i.e.,] emotional energies' (Collins 1981). Since the moral life draws on institutionally mediated sources and on intuitive and emotional motivations, the potency of insights from analysis of ethical texts could be enhanced by an understanding of these features of

the late classical and early Hellenistic world, drawn from archaeology, literary and documentary evidence. (The argument here is evolving into a book. I draw from the larger argument several ideas relevant to the conference theme of 'catching', 'teaching', and 'seeking' the virtues.)

The Greek world was comprised of hundreds of *poleis*, each distinctive and proud, with dynamic histories (Hansen and Nielsen 2004; Ma 2024). The polis of Aristotle's adulthood, Athens itself could hardly be considered static, especially in Aristotle's period (384-322 BCE). Aristotle was born in Stagira in the Chalcidian peninsula, a colony of Andros, an ally and tributary of Athens during the first Athenian league (Natali and Hutchinson 2013, 6). Passed by Xerxes before he invaded Greece in 480, the peninsula was invaded in 348 by Philip of Macedon, who then destroyed or forced the *poleis* of the region into submission (Natali and Hutchinson 2013, 6).

Athens had dominated the Greek world. Known for its luxury, its impressive built environment, and its extraordinary culture, Athens' population had swelled in the fifth century to more than 60,000 adult males. Following its loss to Sparta in the Peloponnesian war, a multipolar competition ensued among Sparta, Thebes, Thessaly, and Athens. By the end of the 350s, Athenian and Theban efforts to establish hegemony failed. In this condition, Athens could marshal only 6,000 hoplites, leading to protracted micro-regional warfare and setting up tensions between large and small *poleis* throughout the fourth century. Several *poleis* that dominated during the Archaic period attempted to gain control again: Elis, Corinth, Rherai (Thessaly), Opous (E. Tokris), Olynthos (Chalcidian peninsula), Matineia (Arcadia), Mytilene, and Syracuse (Sicily and S. Italy). Certainly the imperialistic impulse reflected a desire to emulate Athens, but it was also a feature of Hellenic formation in these *poleis* to instill, with Homer in the curriculum, the heroic virtues (Ma 2024). Monarchical behavior was fairly widespread, appearing in Athens (Pericles), Sparta (Lysandros), Thebes (Epaminondas and Pelopidas), and Thessaly (Iason of Pherai) (Ma 2024, 173–74). Several *poleis* were subsumed in regional consolidations, and others fought to keep their *autonomia* (Ma 2024, 174). Aristotle would have been aware of these developments based on his connections to political power and his empirical research about several *poleis* as illustrations of types of constitutions and society for his *Politics*.

Teaching the Virtues

The first method of forming virtue we explore is teaching or learning the virtues through instruction, requiring a curriculum, educators, students, and institutions in some form.

Households and Tutors

The societies of Athens and other Greek *poleis* lacked the educational structures of modern societies. Education was primarily the responsibility of families rather than the state (Sparta being a notable exception). Early formation occurred primarily within the household, where the family, including servants and friends, served as the primary authors in a child's upbringing. For the wealthy, this stage often involved a pedagogue, a figure who acted as a tutor, protector, and mentor to oversee the youth's formation. The goal of this early guidance was not merely intellectual but aimed to shape the 'whole person' (body and soul) for full participation in the life of the household, religious practices, and the political community.

Ancient Greek education (Cribiore 2005; 2015; Beck 1964; Olson 2024), described by Isocrates as a "gymnastics of the mind," was a rigorous process likened to climbing a steep hill where

students built mental stamina through discipline and repetition. While historians traditionally divide this schooling into three distinct stages (primary literacy, secondary grammar, and advanced rhetoric) the reality was often fluid, with overlapping boundaries depending on local needs and the availability of instructors. Schools were defined by the teacher, often operating in informal and sometimes precarious settings ranging from open-air street corners and temple precincts to private homes. Specialised buildings for education did exist: the 2022-2025 excavations of a gymnasium in Agrigento, on the southern coast of Sicily, provide a dramatic example of a *palaestra* spanning multiple terraces and featuring monumental walls and sophisticated water systems. A lecture hall with capacity for as many as 200 connected directly to a vast, bench-lined hall, a spatial arrangement that challenges the traditional view of the *apodyterium* as a mere changing room; instead, the proximity to the auditorium implies it functioned as a social hub for 'agreeable sojourns' and intellectual exchange (Trümper et al. 2022).

The curriculum was strictly hierarchical and closely followed the principle of imitation, beginning with the rote memorization of the alphabet and syllables before progressing to copying maxims and reading continuous texts. At the secondary level, the grammarian guided students through a fixed cultural canon dominated by Homer—particularly the *Iliad*—along with Euripides, Menander, and Isocrates. Because books were valuable, instruction often depended on teacher-produced examples written on durable, inexpensive materials like pottery sherds (ostraca) or wooden tablets, which students copied to master penmanship and memorize literary content. For the elite minority who reached the summit of tertiary education, the goal was to acquire the 'wings' of eloquence necessary for public and administrative life. Under the guidance of a rhetor, students engaged in complex preliminary exercises (*progymnasmata*) and declamations (*meletai*), learning to compose persuasive arguments on historical or fictitious legal themes.

The educational system was deeply enmeshed with social status; it was funded and closely monitored by parents who viewed it as an investment toward their own future support, and it served as a powerful vehicle for preserving "Greekness" and maintaining the social order within the wider Mediterranean world.

Traditions and Customs

The Greek world was comprised of hundreds of small and large *poleis*, so this approach reflects the most accessible evidence, not a full understanding of the Hellenic world. Common Greek values across *poleis* do emerge: freedom, autonomy, self-governance, respect for and even deference toward the commoner, civilian control of the military, word and deed matching up in one's life, and so on (Hanson 1999; Ma 2024; Ober 2015; 2009).

The formation of virtue was probably not a uniform experience in Hellas. To demonstrate what I mean, I draw several examples from John Ma's *Polis* (2024). In the resource-scarce environment of Herakleia, civic culture was defined by a 'nuanced poetics of community' born of fragility. The formation of virtue was centred on restraint and solidarity; the 'Goat Law', which bound citizens by oath to limit grazing for the sake of agriculture, suggests a *paideia* focused on mutual survival. Unlike the competitive glory-seeking of Homeric heroes, a Herakleian was formed to see their personal safety as inextricably linked to the 'protection and safety' of the whole island, including non-citizens, subordinating individual profit to the collective fate.

Athens presents a unique trajectory of consolidation from a 'galaxy of settlements' rather than a single nucleus, with distinct clusters at the Akropolis, the Agora, and further afield (Academy of Plato). In the eighth century BCE, this loose collection of communities was defined by intense elite competition and status display, visible in the 'Big Graves' and monumental funerary vases depicting processions of chariots and warriors. However, unlike the egalitarian restraint seen in smaller *poleis*, Athenian consolidation retained a scale of immense resources and mobilization; by the time of the Persian Wars, this 'giant polis' (controlling a territory of over 2,000 square kilometers) could mobilize 180 triremes and 8,000 heavily armed hoplites, dwarfing most other Greek states. This evolution suggests a civic culture formed through the successful integration of diverse, competitive elite groups into a massive, resource-rich state capable of projecting power on an imperial scale.

In contrast to the individualistic valor of the Early Iron Age 'Big Men', the polis of Paros developed a culture of radical interchangeability and sameness. The discovery of a mass grave from around 700 BCE, containing 150 soldiers buried in identical amphoras, probably signals a shift in moral formation away from the emulation of idiosyncratic aristocratic heroes toward a uniform solidarity. By burying the elite leaders alongside commoners in a shared monument, the city taught that the highest virtue was no longer standing out but standing shoulder-to-shoulder in the phalanx and identifying across differences even in death. This visual uniformity reinforced a civic virtue based on equality and the suppression of elite distinction for the sake of the community.

At Drēros, the formation of virtue was strictly tied to the 'constitutional' discipline of written law. The inscription of the temple of Apollo, forbidding a magistrate from holding office again within ten years, institutionalized the virtue of yielding power. Education in Drēros focused on the fear of becoming 'useless' (*akrestos*) to the state, a status threatened against those who violated the rotation of office. This created a civic culture where authority resided not in a charismatic person, but in the inscribed text, teaching citizens that the good person is one who knows when to step down and submit to the decisions of the polis.

Religious and Cultic Life

Despite Aristotle's skepticism, religious rites and cults widely influenced the Greek world. Greek religion took its animating influences not from revelation but evidence, according to Robert Parker (2011). Piety was taken to be genuine because it worked, and oracles offered interventions within the scope of particular problems. The prosperity of a polis was evidence that the people's ancestral rites were effective. Disaster or suffering, on the other hand, indicated divine justice (Chaniotis 2012). Miracles, violations of natural law, didn't hold as much sway as epiphanies, or manifestations of divine help. Myths, too, offered not so much authoritative accounts of the gods as shapes, attributions, and differentiations among divine ideas (Herodotus 2.53; (Parker 2011, 24–25)), often with regional variations that would be accepted as received because one was born into them. The core of Greek religion was the practice of rituals, especially sacrifices that established communication with the god and prepared one for a feast, but opinions and beliefs of the gods were meaningful to their adherents as well. Discussion of religion took as its referent 'the gods' or 'the divine', except in describing cultic practices and the gods' functions, such as Poseidon's 'turbulence' or Athena's 'cunning intelligence'. A city would take a 'chief god' who would fill multiple roles, a 'concertina' that could expand to protect the polis in all aspects. Heroes functioned as 'minor gods' and were invoked for immediate benefits or prestige (Parker

2011, 110–23; Pavlides 2023, ch. 6). *Poleis* practiced piety in divergent ways, and households employed everyday materials in the construction of shrines and enactment of rituals (Morgan 2010). Inequality of women as citizens of a polis was partially redressed by "cultic citizenship," the opportunity to pray, sacrifice, and participate in festivals (Parker 2011, 241–43).

The Greeks seemed to observe a "divine thread" in history, the conviction that justice is eventually done, even if it was "slow and oblique" (Parker 2011, 9). The corollary is that the wicked eventually suffer, so the exercise of the virtues, especially related to piety, was, at least indirectly, rewarded by the gods (Mikalson 1983, 27–30). When one suffered injustice, inscribed prayers for justice could channel emotions that would ordinarily drive one to retaliate (Salvo 2012). Keeping one's word was essential; oaths were sometimes symbolized by the sacrifice of oxen that were cut into pieces as a warning to avoid divine destruction (Parker 2011, 156–58). There seemed to have been a commonsensical moral intuition that evaluated the base actions of gods as revealing their lack of divinity. Admirable qualities took form as "Graces and Seasons and Destinies," and figures embodying Love (Eros), Persuasion, Arete (Virtue), Fair Fame, Peace, or Concord found their way into cultic practice (Parker 2011, 77–78). Religious festivals could recognize those who protected the polis with courage and from shame to be selected to pray on behalf of the citizens for "health, lawfulness (*eunomia*), peace, blameless wealth, and permanent nobility (*kalokagathia*)" (Parker 2011, 218); likewise, priests were often selected for their moral exemplarity (*biou taxei*). Heroes, however, did not always have these qualities, so individuals had to exercise moral judgement about the suitability of exemplars (Parker 2011, 104).

These exercises of religious rites and beliefs may have been considered by Aristotle to be useful only for 'ensuring…continual encounter with depictions of excessively virtuous agents (the traditional gods), beginning in childhood' (Segev 2019, 77–82). But such regular engagement with issues of authority, justice, meaning, self-control, exemplars, and the like, would have intersected profoundly with the moral and civic formation of young people.

Seeking the Virtues

A second way in which the virtues are formed is through experiences in which students aspire to a good life by attempting aspects of it. In the world of Greek *poleis*, such experiences were available in music and the arts (as 'preparations for leisure' (Curren 2010, 551)), sport, military training, and commerce.

Music and the Arts

In ancient Greece, 'there was no human activity without music' (Perrot 2020, 90). Women and nurses performed on the *kithara* and harp in their rooms where they raised children and wove cloth. Boys also learned to play the lyre and pipe, usually in music teachers' homes. Benefactions established music schools. Poetry was performed to musical accompaniment and symposia featured music, as did workplaces, public spaces, sanctuaries, cemeteries, and specialised theaters (Perrot 2020). The ethics of music had a long history in the Hellenic world. Pythagoreanism taught that the human soul was a microcosm of the world: health in the body and justice in the soul were states of *harmonia* (attunement); disease and vice manifest dissonance. The soul could be re-tuned by external sonic forces, meaning that listening to music

was a process of active alignment. Ordered, rational music could tune the soul; disordered, complex music could 'un-tune' one's character. Damon of Oa, a musical theorist whom Plato quoted in the *Republic* ("musical modes are nowhere altered without changes in the most important laws of the state," 424c [book 3]), argued that music generates movement in the soul, enacting emotions that lead to courage or cowardice. Music could shape character in young and old (*Charakter in Jungen und Alten bilden*, (Harmon 2006)). Rhythm, too, not least in poetry, influenced one's movement and action, based on the ratio of upbeats and downbeats (Zaminer et al. 2006).

Visual art, too, was loaded with moral meaning. Sculpture of the classical period celebrated idealization, depicting a human *type* rather than an *individual*. The *doryphoros* (spear bearer) was a kind of moral blueprint that used symmetry to embody *sophrosyne* (self-control/moderation), showing balance between relaxation and readiness, powerful musculature balanced with grace. The image invites a kind of moral reflection: make the soul as balanced as this body (Leftwich 1987). Vase painting portrayed everyday scenes: Douris' 'school cup' (Berlin 2285; (Booth 1985)), for example, shows masters teaching boys the lyre, reading from a scroll, and writing on wax tablets. The images suggest the importance of literacy and memorization, as well as the authority dynamics among the teachers, students, and pedagogues. Theater, too, provided emotional and moral stimulation, offering catharsis, as Aristotle argued, with experiences of pity and fear in a controlled environment. The appropriate objects of emotion were learned and practiced. Hubris was frequently warned of, and the chorus modeled proper civic responses to events. The audience's 'ethical disposition to drama became dominant' in the fourth century especially (Roselli 2011).

Sport and Athletic Training

The ancient Greeks are famous for their athletics, derived from *athlon* (prize), and the Olympic games. Based on evidence from Homer and archaeology, Greek sports included pentathlon events (footrace, wrestling, javelin, discus, jump), boxing, chariot races, archery, hoplomachia (training in heavy armour), dancing, singing, bull-leaping, and acrobatics. While the evidence mostly focuses on men in training and competitions, women sometimes trained and won prizes. Athletes faced the pressures from their families, social status, and polis (Kyle 2014). Competitions could be fierce, with boxing contests, for example, ending only when an athlete gave up in exhaustion or was too injured to continue (Poliakoff 1987). Ball sports were sometimes played with defeated enemies' skulls or other body parts (Herman 2006, 305).

The understanding of athletic training has shifted in recent years from methods of physical education to moral laboratories, a clinic for the soul where virtues were diagnosed, practiced, honed, and celebrated (Miller 2004, 235–38). Athletic training and competitions had a 'two-fold nature': 'preparation for war and prestige for the skilled, quite apart from the sheer joy of participation' (Beck 1964). A trainer would balance aggressive energy (*thymos*) with reason (logos). Specific exercises were intended to cure a 'soft' or self-indulgent nature (*malakia*), or wrestling to temper an overly aggressive ego (Reid 2011). Likewise, athletic contests provided a high-speed test of *phronesis*, a series of ethical choices under pressure, reinforcing habits. Sport did teach *andreia* (courage) but also *sophrosyne* (moderation/self-control); a 'pedagogy of defeat' taught athletes to be conquered without losing dignity. Socially, such ups and downs were preparation for being outvoted in the assembly. The meaning of these terms evolved, in part, through the sixth and fifth centuries in the memorials celebrating the exemplary qualities of

victors (Nicholson 2025). Training typically occurred individually but could be offered in groups as it seems to have been in Athens (Plato, *Stat*. 294d, e).

Military Training and Ethos

Most men served in the military. Such service 'offered valuable education, by helping to instill a sense of common purpose and the necessity of cooperation in those who marched in the phalanx or rowed the triremes' (Ober 2009, 160). For decades, scholars viewed the Athenian *ephebeia* as a military institution that declined into a finishing school. Recently, state-sponsored training for eighteen- to twenty-year-olds has been analyzed for its importance as a "revivalist" project to instill virtues such as *sophrosyne* (self-control), *eutaxia* (good order), and *peitharchia* (obedience) to cure moral decay in Athens. Training involved not only weapons drills (*hoplomachia*) but also labour (*ponos*) such as patrolling borders or watching garrisons, framed as a moral test of endurance. These developments continued into the Hellenistic period and incorporated philosophical training to form virtuous citizens not only successful soldiers (R. Henderson 2020). Recent research has also interpreted Spartan military training as training the "social brain" with the synchronized movement required by the phalanx. This developed a pre-rational sense of solidarity and "muscular bonding" that was essential to military success (R. Henderson 2020). Likewise, a new interpretation suggests that, rather than only being a tight formation that engaged in shoving matches (*othismos*) and rewarded steadfastness, phalanx warfare was looser and more open, requiring individual courage and skill in a chaotic environment (Konijnendijk 2017; Echeverria 2015; Rey 2010; but note Lanphier 2025). Recent research has also found that Greek armies were genetically diverse, suggesting that professionalism and contracts may have played a larger role in military cohesion than only civic patriotism (Reitsema et al. 2022; Cohen 2000, 18–19).

Battles provided opportunities to display leadership qualities and virtues, as often highlighted by historians in their narratives (Hanson 2002). Inscriptions, too, tell similar stories to foreground the courage, sacrifice, initiative, and heroism of military leaders; see, for example, an inscription honoring Callias of Sphettus for his ἀρετῆς … καὶ εὐνοίας, (virtue and goodwill: SEG XXVIII 60, lines 90-91; (Chaniotis 2013). Such accounts reflect not only the virtues and skills of the commanders and soldiers but the values of the *polis* that awarded honors and recognitions.

Commerce and Employment

Much is made in philosophical discourse about the aristocratic virtue of andreia (courage). Recent work has emphasized the importance for laborers such as nurses, midwives, and tutors of the virtue of *chrestos* (useful/good/worthy) and *pistos* (trustworthiness). Their labor created value for others. An Athenian epitaph illustrates the principle: Melitta, the daughter of a prominent metic, worked as a wet nurse. A stele erected by her employer praises her *chrestos* and invokes honors for her in the afterlife with Persephone and Pluto (IG II^2 7873, lines 5, 10). While in most Greek literature a nurse was a functional tool, in practice her employer believes that her faithful labor earned her honors (*timai*) from the gods, much as a hero would in the great epics.

Unlike the philosophers who denigrated manual labor, virtue was found in techne (skill) and *philoponia* (love of toil). Many epitaphs treat hard work as a contest (agon) of excellence (arete). The epitaph of Atotas from the fourth century BCE, for example, praises the silver smith as "great-hearted" and places him in the lineage of the Homeric hero Pylaemenes (IG II^2 10051,

lines 2, 4). Other stelai visualize the honoree holding tools with a pose of dignity (e.g. stele of Xanthippos in Athens c. 420 BCE, IG II^2 12332).

The economic backdrop on which such labor gained significance was one of economic "efflorescence," a sustained period of growth that raised the standard of living for many citizens (O'Halloran 2019). The development of human capital also emerges around this period, making more prominent the idea that Athens succeeded because of investments in the skills and knowledge of its citizens, metics, and slaves alike. These investments came about mostly through apprenticeships and technical training. These new contexts and types of character formation expanded access and depth to the development of the virtues.

Catching the Virtues

A third mode of developing the virtues is acquiring them by osmosis, as it were, from one's environment. Here I consider the built environment, intellectual paradigms and practices, associations, and forms of social life.

Built Environment

The formation of a Greek person would have begun in the home. Greek houses in the classical period were mostly single-access, courtyard houses. They featured restricted access through a street entrance that shielded the interior from the view of the street. A courtyard served as the focal point and central hub of a house, providing light and ventilation to the adjoining rooms and the primary circulation route. A portico with a roof provided shelter to the main living rooms. An *andron* (men's room) featured couches for the symposium (drinking party) and was located near the entrance to provide easy access without disturbing the rest of the household. The women's quarters (*gunaikon*) facilitated weaving and the preparation of food, although women used most rooms of the house. Rooms could serve different functions depending on the time of day and season; microscopic floor deposits have revealed that rooms served multiple purposes, such as a dining room used for weaving or storage during the day. Rural houses often incorporated towers for storage and fortifications during times of conflict. Later in the fourth century, palaces began to appear, as did houses with two courtyards to facilitate larger scale public entertaining among wealthier citizens (Nevett 2023).

Recent archaeological studies have found that industrial installments like granaries, workshops, and harbor facilities were integrated with the urban environment. Geophysical prospection has revealed the orthogonal grid plan of Sikyon that seemed to use a formal zoning system for residential and public spaces that was previously invisible to the naked eye. Archaeological evidence from Pergamos reveals the integration of military infrastructure with residential areas. Similarly, at Asini, an underwater excavation showed that a fourth-century stoa evidences the integration of public monumental structures with commercial activities. Religious buildings also served water management purposes, such as drains and cisterns.

Associations

Aristotle argued that everyone desires to participate in a *koinonia*, community or association (*Pol.* 1253a). Despite the egalitarian ethos of Athens, the central government was exclusive and difficult to access for many. The solution, especially for rural residents, women, metics, and

slaves, involved associations (*koinoniai*). Associations offered an alternative context for political participation and social stability. A law attributed to Solon (594 BCE) allowed the creation of associations (Jones 1999, 37), provided they did not conflict with state laws. In this way, the state could validate useful associations or regulate dangerous associations. Those who could not compete in the rhetorical culture of the central assemblies benefited from the more accessible, manageable political environment of local associations (Jones 1999, 47–50). Tribal (*phylai*) associations developed a form of representative government and bestowed honors on members who held state office, incentivizing them to pursue the association's interest within the central government (Ober 2015, 170–71). Likewise, the demarch (deme leader) represented the *deme* to the state and fulfilled administrative functions on the state's behalf at the local level. Associations were central components of the polis ecosystem (Ma 2024, 417–18), 'micro-*poleis*' that mimicked civic structures, provided social safety nets, and offered a unique space where the rigid boundaries between citizen, metic (resident alien), slave, and woman were often more porous than in the central assembly (Ober 2015, 246–47).

The state relied on these private groups to perform essential functions, organizing festivals, managing local shrines, and even ensuring social stability. If one belonged to an association, one was not merely 'in a club'; one was participating in a recognized unit of the polis structure, which provided a form of political leverage and social capital. In this way, associations were crucibles for the formation of virtue. 'The polis existed both as a heightened, utopian, political image and as a complex realist interaction of actual social actors'. That realist interaction depended in large part on participation in associations, which, as 'as social organizations…offered spaces for relations of hierarchy and patronage of the type that was precluded by the institutional and ideological setup of the *polis*'. They 'ensured religious, funerary, economic, and collaborative functions' (Ma 2024, 253–54) that would have emotionally bound their members to the polis ecosystem and offered an often diverse set of relationships in which to practice the excellences whose nurture sustained the polis itself.

Forms of Social Life and Practice

While we often attend to Greek rhetoricians who argued legal cases or philosophers who engaged in formal dialogue, other forms of social interaction were significant, especially the emergent intelligence facilitated by democracy. Self-government was not a static skill but rather was a function of expertise founded in knowledge held by specific individuals in specific contexts. Situated in this way, knowledge circulated in free spaces such as workshops, markets, and barber shops, which allowed discrete pockets of knowledge to be aggregated and shared. This social approach to knowledge allowed "unknown unknowns" to emerge, information that the community did not know it needed but could press into service. Lysias 23 (*Against Pancleon*) as the primary case study (Sobak 2015). An Athenian citizen attempts to sue Pancleon, who is believed to be a metic (foreigner) but who himself claims to be an Athenian citizen from Plataia in the deme of Dekelea. To determine his status, the plaintiff must navigate the informal networks of Athens. Investigating three levels of networks eventually reveals an 'unknown unknown': Pancleon is neither a Dekelean nor a metic but a runaway slave. The ability to solve problems came not from top-down policing but bottom-up knowledge circulation through free spaces of the economy.

Similarly, Socrates constantly wandered between the Piraeus to the Agora, visiting shops and interrogating everyone, bridging elite networks of aristocrats and networks of craftsmen, like shoemakers, carpenters, and smiths. He thus became 'the living instantiation of Athenian common knowledge' (Sobak 2015). Unlike Plato whose republic could be viewed as a top-down enterprise to be led by political experts (the "weaver" who controls the threads), Socrates demonstrated that wisdom comes from the continuous movement and aggregation of partial truths found among common people.

The form of social life in largely democratic societies like the Greek *poleis* that loved freedom and autonomy drew on collective, emergent knowledge that was partially held by people in all corners, at all levels, among all groups of a polis. The virtues, then, had to be developed in all citizens, not only in leaders. Furthermore, the relative freedom of knowledge circulation and network building would have formed a love for freedom and one's fellow resident, even if markedly different. Regular bridging network activity would inculcate virtues of patriotism, tolerance, and curiosity. "Barefooted circulation" would generate solidarity and virtuous attachment.

Conclusion: Into Practice

What practical insights can be gleaned from this potted account of the world in which Aristotelian virtue ethics emerged, a world that Aristotle taught and assumed would be present and formative?

Character is taught: the Hellenic evidence suggests educators should build around a core of literary and scientific knowledge, like the Greeks did with the Iliad, that readily conveys the virtues, commitments, aspirations, and skills essential to both the thriving of the community and the flourishing of the student. The gymnasium of Agrigento, laid out with social spaces connected to intellectual spaces, suggests the importance of weaving the intellectual and civic virtues. Religious institutions are deeply formative; educators can see the virtues they are teaching as complementary to 'thicker' instruction and practice that religious students receive in congregations when, like the Greeks, they confront transcendent and ultimate realities. Simple definitions of common virtue-related terms seem to have been widely held among ordinary people: shared moral vocabulary is decisive. Even without wide availability of schools, the Greeks had an important insight about the most important educators: parents in a household and the influences they curate.

Character is sought: Greek ideas and experiences of music, art, and theater should be opportunities to reflect on relevant virtues (for audience and performer). The structure, history, and media of music and the visual and performing arts offer moral insights that educators should highlight from a young age. Employment, in students' formative years and in their careers, offers opportunities to demonstrate and learn the challenges of applying the virtues. Educators' talking about work and military service in this way would be immensely helpful. Sport features in nearly every school; the ancient roots of athletics, and their integration of the virtues, can be a novel way of encouraging students to seek character.

Character is caught: polis design and laws, and the consistency of educational evidence from across the Greek world, suggest that intentionality is critical. The Greek 'social epistemology'

suggests that people of all walks of life are important models and teachers of character. The evidence of various poleis traditions and customs reveals that 'priority virtues' that are non-negotiable for a school community should be insisted upon. Funerary epitaphs we explored reveal, in modern terms, the 'life mission' of the honoree, including one or more important virtues. Significantly, such virtues were recognized, prioritised, and memorialised by the employer or family member. Today's students should be encouraged to begin with their end in mind: how do they want to be remembered, and how do they want to live? The work of a school leadership team should answer the same questions and live by their answers in all aspects of their operations and culture. Civic associations with which schools may partner can also be formative, even if such membership may not be as prevalent as it was in Greek *poleis*.

The Greeks created poleis in which character could be taught, caught, and sought. Philosophers give us a rich start to understanding this. Understanding the historical ecology of antiquity supports educators' efforts to bring the virtues to life in the complex world of late modernity.

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