

# Ten myths about character, virtue and virtue education – plus three well-founded misgivings

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### Ten Myths About Character, Virtue and Virtue Education - Plus Three Well-Founded Misgivings

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## TEN MYTHS ABOUT CHARACTER, VIRTUE AND VIRTUE EDUCATION – PLUS THREE WELL-FOUNDED MISGIVINGS

by KRISTJÁN KRISTJÁNSSON, *Jubilee Centre for Character and Values, University of Birmingham*

*ABSTRACT: Initiatives to cultivate character and virtue in moral education at school continue to provoke sceptical responses. Most of those echo familiar misgivings about the notions of character, virtue and education in virtue – as unclear, redundant, old-fashioned, religious, paternalistic, anti-democratic, conservative, individualistic, relative and situation dependent. I expose those misgivings as ‘myths’, while at the same time acknowledging three better-founded historical, methodological and practical concerns about the notions in question.*

*Keywords: virtue, character, character/virtue education, virtue ethics*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of cultivating (moral) character and virtue through virtue education in schools continues to be described as controversial (see, for example, Evans, 2012). For those unfamiliar with the historical discourse (especially in educational circles) on character and virtue, the controversial nature of this aim may seem baffling. After all, the Final Report of the Riots Communities and Victims’ Panel (2012), published in the wake of the August 2011 riots – a report that *inter alia* recommended new school initiatives to help children build character – seemed to have been warmly received by media and the general public. Yet various negative conceptions about the notions of character, virtue and virtue education remain in academic circles.

The negative conceptions are represented by what I would call 10 proverbial and persistent myths about the concepts in question. I argue in Section 2 that those myths are based on *conceptual* (Myths 1 and 2), *historical* (Myths 3 and 4), *moral* (Myths 5 and 6), *political* (Myths 7 and 8), *epistemological* (Myth 9) and *psychological* (Myth 10) misunderstandings or misinterpretations of character and virtue. Although some of my deconstructions will need to be quick and rely on references to background literatures rather than knock-down arguments, I hope to show that the objections underlying the 10 myths are not serious stumbling blocks to the aim of virtue education.

As some of the myths in question have in recent times, however, lost their academic lustre (while still remaining powerful in the public consciousness and in public debate), I need to be careful not to passionately storm half-abandoned

forts while the adversaries have regrouped behind stronger, more defensible lines. In Section 3, I therefore respond to three more serious misgivings about character, virtue and virtue education (one *historical*, one *methodological* and one *practical*) that I consider to be well founded and worthy of serious attention.

## 2. THE TEN MYTHS

### *Myth 1: 'Character and Virtue are Unclear Notions'*

An initial sceptical question about virtue education is what the concepts of character and virtue really mean. Are these essentially unclear and ambiguous notions? In comparison with the 'closed' concepts of mathematics and natural kinds, one could say that they are. There is no platinum bar of good character preserved in a French museum. However, in comparison with other standard concepts in philosophy and social science, there is nothing peculiar about them. Most concepts in those disciplines are either open-textured natural concepts (such as 'freedom') or clustered family-resemblance concepts (such as 'game'). Philosophers have developed ways of trimming the ragged edges of such concepts through critical revisions. Yet troublesome borderline cases will always remain. Even such a common everyday concept as that of 'teacher' is an open-textured one. Was Confucius really the 'first teacher'? I suppose that depends on the definition!

As far as open-textured concepts go, 'character' and 'virtue' have a comparatively stable meaning in mainstream academic discourse. To start with 'character', Gordon Allport provided it with a concise and transparent specification in the 1930s as 'personality evaluated' – and personality, in turn, as 'character devaluated' (Allport, 1937, p. 52). Since then, in personality psychology, 'character' has been used to refer to that sub-set of personality traits that are morally evaluable and considered to provide persons with moral worth. Most philosophers and educationists will take that to mean that those traits are reason-responsive and educable. So, to give an example, *conscientiousness* as a personality trait (*qua* one of the famous Big-Five traits in personality psychology) refers to the state of being generally disciplined, reliable and predictable. None of these descriptions is meant to carry any moral connotations. A crook can be conscientiousness as such, and reliable in dealings with fellow crooks. Moreover, conscientiousness as a personality trait may be partly inherited and hard to educate into or out of people. In contrast, conscientiousness as a character trait (or *moral* conscientiousness) is a learnt quality: a character strength or a virtue. If it so happens that the word 'character' is gradually losing its moral shades of meaning in ordinary parlance – so that teachers are, for instance, quite happy to refer to such amoral capabilities or competencies as emotional regulation and optimism as 'character traits' – then we can simply insert the word 'moral' in front of 'character' to convey the standard academic meaning.

The most pronounced and developed states of morally good character are called 'virtues' and those of morally bad character 'vices'. Again there is considerable consistency in the way these notions have been used – and are still

used – in the literature, harking all the way back to Plato and (especially) Aristotle. Virtues and vices are taken to be settled (stable and consistent) *states of character* (or *hexeis* in Greek), concerned with morally praiseworthy or blameworthy conduct in significant and distinguishable spheres of human life. Each character trait of this sort typically comprises a unique set of attention, emotion, desire and behaviour, but also a certain comportment or style of expression, applicable in the relevant sphere. The compassionate person thus *notices* easily and *attends to* situations in which the lot of others has been undeservedly compromised, *feels* for the needs of those who have suffered this undeserved misfortune, *desires* that their misfortune be reversed, *acts* for the relevant (ethical) reasons in ways conducive to that goal and *exudes* an outward aura of empathy and care. Individual virtues and vices have always played a key role in moral language. Although we may blame or praise a person for acts that we deem to be ‘out of character’, we more commonly praise or blame individual actions, emotions, desires and comportments as embodiments of more general states of character. If someone acts in a cruel way, we typically condemn not only the individual action, but also the actor for being a cruel person – for possessing the vice of cruelty (see further in Kristjánsson, 2013).

Virtue theorists from Aristotle onwards typically claim that the virtues are not only *instrumentally* related to their ultimate goal – which tends to be assumed to be the individual’s happiness, well-being or flourishing – but are actually *constitutive* of it. This understanding has led many theorists to make a sharp distinction between *virtues* and *skills*, where the latter are simply instrumental to some independent (and typically self-chosen) end. I concur with Annas (2011), however, in that it is not helpful to yield the everyday concept of a skill wholly to the instrumentalists, as if they have a monopoly on it. Rather, I would follow Aristotle in seeing virtues as human excellences of a sort, just as ordinary skills are (the musical skills of harpist, for instance), but as differing from such ordinary skills in their: *irreplacability* (whereas a harpist who gives up on the harp in order to pursue a career in athletics, at which she is also adept, is no less of a human being, a person who gives up on moral virtues cannot actualise her true well-being as the virtues are constitutive of it); *depth* (significant changes in one’s virtues and vices are tantamount to radical self-transformations, whereas changes in one’s repertoire of skills typically are not); and *scope or ubiquity* (whereas skills have local functions, virtues inform globally all our encounters with others and enable us to perform well our characteristic function as human beings).

In short, there need not be anything essentially unclear or ambiguous about the notions of ‘character’ and ‘virtue’, and the Aristotelian formal definitions of them provide a convenient way of making oneself understood both to academic colleagues and the general public. However, not all virtue ethics is Aristotelian (see further in the section on Myth 9), and it can scarcely be the aim of virtue educators to reduce the polyphony of voices on virtue ethical issues to one. The same goes for the definition of ‘character education’ or ‘virtue education’ (I use those terms interchangeably from now on). The common understanding of ‘character

education' in education circles is unfortunately limited to a certain *type* of character education that blossomed in the USA towards the end of the twentieth century. But there is no good reason to kowtow to that narrow specification. Rather, given the definitions of 'character' and 'virtue' already proposed, 'character education' is best understood as any form of moral education that foregrounds the role of virtuous character in the good life.

*Myth 2: 'Character and Virtue are Redundant Notions'*

Still, even if the notions of character and virtue are clear and do have a distinguished pedigree, they might yet be said to have been overtaken by more contemporary notions that capture better what we aim to say by such language. In support of this thesis, critics might cite the findings of a recent study of the use of general and specific virtue words in 5.2 million American books published between 1901 and 2000, which shows a steady decline in the use of traditional virtue terms (Kesebir and Kesebir, 2012). What could such terms then have been replaced by?

Two possibilities present themselves. One is the Big-Five Model of personality: about the traits of openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism that are precisely alleged to capture what is most significant about individual personal differences. Against the earlier observation that these traits are explicitly defined such as to exclude moral content, Big-Five theorists could respond that conscientiousness and agreeableness precisely suffice to describe the specific characteristics of so-called virtuous people. As I have argued elsewhere (Kristjánsson, 2013, chap. 3), however, despite advantages of the Big-Five model for some purposes, the model suffers from arbitrariness regarding the traits that make us 'who we are' in an everyday sense. By excluding moral properties from their potential list of traits that comprise our everyday self, personality psychologists risk obscuring and diluting what is central to us. For instance, if we think of conscientiousness as a trait that defines us in a way that is relevant to our everyday engagements with other people, this notion seems to be exhausted by its moral import. The same would apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to agreeableness. To take a parallel example from the field of education, considerable emphasis used to be placed on the difference between a teacher's classroom *style* (which was supposed to reflect non-moral personality traits) and a teacher's *manner* (meant to capture what was moral in relation to the teacher's conduct). A closer look, however, revealed that the two could not be separated for any relevant purposes. In so far as a teacher's 'style' matters in the classroom, it is because of its moral implications: its impact on student well-being (see Kristjánsson, 2007, pp. 152–155).

The second candidate for a vocabulary that might make the notions of character and virtue redundant is that of self-concepts (such as self-esteem, self-regulation and self-efficacy), which were almost non-existent in public discourse before 1990 but have since proliferated in educational discourse. As I have previously argued, however, self-concepts derive from a narrowly understood

cognitive, constructivist and amoral paradigm of human self-hood that equates people's true selves with the beliefs they entertain about themselves. Bluntly, this paradigm has wound up in a linguistic (Smith, 2006), educational (Cigman, 2004), psychological (Baumeister *et al.*, 2003) and moral (Kristjánsson, 2010) quagmire. We cannot do without a paradigm of self-hood that understands it as non-constructed, emotion-infused, morally engaged and often hidden from our own view: a paradigm of what I have called 'our actual full selves' (Kristjánsson, 2010, pp. 25–52). The only self-concept that aims at capturing this underlying sense of self is that of *self-respect*. Indeed, it may well be the case that a lot of old-style virtue-talk has been translated in recent years into talk of self-respect (Kristjánsson, 2010, pp. 148–166). Yet, although 'self-respectful' may be a helpful umbrella term for a person who is overall virtuous (and conscious of the need to preserve that virtuousness), it is lacking in the necessary specificity to designate virtue variances: for instance, the character state of a person who is relatively strong on one virtue but weak on another. Replacing designations of specific virtues with the term 'self-respect' can thus be done only at the cost of considerable (linguistic and moral) impoverishment.

A closer look at Kesebir and Kesebir's (2012) findings shows that while it is true that many specific virtue terms – in addition to the generic terms 'character' and 'virtue' – have declined in use, a few have had a significant positive correlation with time ('compassion', 'integrity', 'fairness', 'tolerance', 'selflessness', 'discipline', 'dependability', 'reliability') and others have remained stable over time ('loyalty', 'trustworthiness', 'forgiveness', 'respect', 'determination'). There is, therefore, no compelling evidence for the redundancy of the virtue vocabulary as such. What seems to have happened, rather, is that its focus has shifted to fewer and more general virtue terms, although the overall rationale provided by the genus-terms '(good) character' and 'virtue' seems to have gone astray in the bargain. As it is unlikely that ordinary language has lost its flexibility to collocate the common elements in specific virtues, we might have to look for new synonyms for 'character' and 'virtue' that the researchers have missed: say 'pro-social' (persons, qualities). It will fall squarely within the remit of UK character educationists, for example, to record the ways in which the virtues are referred to in contemporary discourse in the United Kingdom – for otherwise any future recommendations will fall on deaf ears (or, more specifically, on ears that do not understand the employed terminology). In some cases, this may not be enough; the need may arise to try to resuscitate some old but invaluable ways of speaking (see section on Myth 3). Still, since no recent academic changes of fashion in word-use have made talk of people of good or bad character superfluous, the redundancy thesis can be written off as a myth.

### *Myth 3: 'Character and Virtue are Old-fashioned Notions'*

This claim is closely related to the last one, about redundancy. The focus here is not so much, however, on a vocabulary or paradigm of character/virtue having

been replaced wholesale by some newer cutting-edge one, but rather on the impression that the whole enterprise of preserving old virtue expressions has a quaint Victorian or even medieval feel to it. Have we not moved on from the time when we were obsessed with chivalrous knights and stiff-upper-lipped Mr Darcys bestriding the cultural landscape? Is it not time to sweep out the stables and finally get rid of such noxious historical residue?

However, far from it being the case that virtue concepts are *passé* in contemporary moral theory, the exact opposite seems to be true: virtue ethics is the newest kid on the block in these quarters (see further in the section on Myth 9); and in some sub-areas of research, such as medical ethics, nursing ethics and – arguably also – the ethics of education, it is now widely the moral theory of choice. If Aristotle is hot in moral and educational circles (Curren, 2010), contemporary virtue ethics is even hotter. Still, academic ivory towers are one thing and ordinary morality another, and I did admit at the end of the previous section that some older moral concepts might have to be ‘retrieved’ for contemporary use. Is that not old-fashioned?

I choose to remain obstinately unrepentant here. Reviving and restoring old concepts is not necessarily old-fashioned. Consider contemporary neo-liberalism in economics or contemporary neo-Darwinism in biology. Both are grounded in sets of concepts originating in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, concepts that during large chunks of the twentieth century were thought to be ripe for the sickle. Current theorists may take exception to many aspects of both neo-liberalism and neo-Darwinism, but their complaints are usually based on substantive reasons, not grumbles about relevant concepts being ‘old-fashioned’.

Elizabeth Anscombe (1958), who revived virtue ethics as a preferable alternative to the modern moral theories of deontology and utilitarianism, suggested that ordinary moral language was alright as it is – focusing now, just as it had always done, on human virtues and vices: on Person A’s considerateness or callousness, Person B’s compassion or cruelty, and so on. Moral theorists simply needed to abandon the mistaken approaches of Kant and Mill and reclaim the naturalistic grounding of moral theory in everyday talk about human character, whether good or bad (Anscombe, 1958). If it is true that some of that language has moved from the centre to the fringes of public conversation in the decades since Anscombe’s article was published (Kesebir and Kesebir, 2012), we may have valid moral reasons for wanting to revive it. What is more, the people we want to revive it for may be grateful to us for doing so. In support of that claim, consider one notable finding from the ‘Learning for Life’ Project – the largest empirical study of character education to date in the United Kingdom, with over 70,000 respondents. The finding that I am concerned with here is not the heartening overarching one that young people are ‘interested in their own character and are concerned with enhancing the good aspects’ of it (Arthur, 2010, p. 21), but rather the finding that they are themselves aware of their lack of vocabulary to talk meaningfully about

those issues – and that, when they were provided with such a vocabulary, they cherished it and enjoyed the opportunity to use it (2010, pp. 79–84). Many of us may have experienced the eureka-feeling of coming across phrases, previously unfamiliar to us, that enable us to say exactly what we mean. Thus, the idea that aspirations to breathe new life into concepts that have fallen out of use must count as old-fashioned may be considered another myth.

*Myth 4: 'Character and Virtue are Essentially Religious Notions'*

There is no denying the fact that notions of moral character and virtue are a mainstay of all the world's great religions. However, the idea that 'character' and 'virtue' do not make sense or cannot be justified outside a religious context is an historical non-starter.

In her famous paper, mentioned already, Anscombe (1958) presented moral theorists with a gambit. To give modern moral theory the mooring it requires, theorists either have to return to a religion-based divine-command moral outlook *or* to reinstate an Aristotelian teleology of virtue as constitutive of the ultimate end of human life – *eudaimonia* – but one grounded in state-of-the-art moral psychology. Virtue ethics in our day and age has been, more than anything else, an attempt to flesh out a plausible and feasible account of moral virtue in *post-religious* terms (see, for example, Arthur, 2010, p. 3). In this regard, while psychology may not yet have provided us with the empirical ammunition we need to underpin a satisfactory form of virtue ethics (Kristjánsson, 2013, chap. 4), the alternative of giving up on that project altogether and opting for the other prong of Anscombe's fork is, in our present-day multicultural contexts, one that seems hardly to have occurred to any contemporary virtue ethicists – irrespective of their own personal religious commitments.

*Myth 5: 'Character and Virtue are Paternalistic Notions'*

Paternalism is one of philosophy's trickiest concepts. I shall assume here an everyday understanding according to which an intervention *X* is paternalistic if it involves Person A's forcing *X* upon Person B against, or at least without regard for, Person B's own will, under the pretext that *X* is in Person B's best interests. Is the school teaching of young students about good character paternalistic in this sense? If so, is it a task that should be left to the discretion of their parents, or left undone until they have become mature enough to decide for themselves? The first issue to be determined here is whether character education at school is against the will of parents (who typically act as proxies for younger children) or the students themselves. The evidence suggests that the first is not the case. Parents are typically happy if character issues are addressed at school (Seligman *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, students themselves, in the extensive 'Learning-For-Life'

Study, showed great eagerness to learn more about the virtues at school (Arthur, 2010). None of this should perhaps surprise us, for as Carr puts it, it is in a way:

*much* clearer why it is important to encourage children to be honest, tolerant and fair than it is why they should be taught mathematics or science, for although not all children will develop an interest in or a need for science, all human beings require an interest in honesty or fairness. (Carr, 1991, p. 262)

Let us suppose, however, for the sake of argument that evidence showed the opposite; namely that parents and students would prefer schools not to address issues of good character at all. The idea that the school could then unproblematically leave such issues aside betrays a peculiar conceptual and psychological misconception: namely that the character of children can simply be held in abeyance at school until they reach the age where they have become wise or autonomous enough to decide for themselves. This is a misconception both about the meaning of the terms ‘character’ and ‘education’ and about the psychology of character development. Character is gradually formed from birth through the interactions of children with others; they become just or unjust, as Aristotle reminded us, by engaging in just or unjust acts and from the example of role-models (parents, siblings, peers, teachers). When formal education in character does not occur, virtues and vices will still be *caught* even if they are not directly *taught*. There is no alternative type of moral education that children can be exposed to at school than character education. Character education will always take place there, and although it can obviously be done either well or badly, concerns about character education being paternalistic *per se* are simply red herrings in this context.

To sum up, no teachers can either logically or psychologically dissociate themselves from the practice of character education (cf. Carr, 1991, pp. 243–258). The sensible question that can be asked about a school’s or an individual teacher’s character-education strategy is not whether such education does occur, but whether it is ‘intentional, conscious, planned, pro-active, organized and reflective’ or ‘assumed, unconscious, reactive, subliminal or random’ (Wiley, 1998, p. 18). It does not require deep knowledge of curriculum theory to know which of those two strategies is more propitious for moral learning.

However, it might be said here that I have understood the charge of paternalism in a narrow *educational* sense. What is wrong about character education at school, it could be objected, is that it is – at least when it is made into a formal curricular requirement or a core subject of study – *morally* and *politically* paternalistic. It is not the role of schools to prescribe how people should act and it is, more generally speaking, not the role of government to interfere in individual development of character (cf. Evans, 2012). However, first, education in virtues is not about prescribing, but about teaching students what a morally good life consists of. The claim ‘It is better to be compassionate than cold-hearted’ does not imply ‘Be compassionate!’, any more than the claim that ‘This is a good knife’ implies the order ‘Cut!’. A common failure to acknowledge this distinction rests on a particular misapprehension of moral language as uniquely categorical – as necessarily

implying motivation and hence prescription – called ‘motivational internalism’ (see Kristjánsson, 2013, chap. 5). Second, the charge of political paternalism follows from assuming that the ultimate role of government is only to maximise individuals’ capacity for choice, not what that choice should be about. Apart from the controversial nature of this assumption, an irony lurks here: if what citizens really crave – as all of the empirical evidence seems to indicate – is for government to maximise their well-being rather than simply their range of options (cf. Haybron and Alexandrova, 2013), then ‘forcing them to be free to choose’ is paternalistic, whereas intervening (apparently paternalistically) in their lives in order to enhance their well-being is the essence of anti-paternalism in action.

*Myth 6: ‘Education in Character and Virtue is Anti-democratic and Anti-intellectual’*

It is frequently charged that there is a psycho-moral paradox at the centre of character education. On the one hand, the professed aim of most character education programmes is to produce critical and independent moral choosers; on the other hand, the dominant method prescribed by character educationists from Aristotle onwards is ‘habituation’, which can best be defined as an intentional process of inculcation of character by means of repeated action under outside guidance (see Lawrence, 2011, p. 249). The psycho-moral paradox is therefore: how can it be simultaneously true that it is the aim of moral education to develop persons capable of autonomous engagement in rational moral conduct and that this goal might be secured by inculcating from an early age certain ready-made habits of action and feeling? Is heteronomously formed autonomy psychologically possible and morally justifiable (see Kristjánsson, 2007, pp. 31–47)?

While it must be admitted that one of the most serious lacunae in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* is a failure to explain how exactly habituated reason can be made to morph gradually into critical thinking, the only reasonable response is that we know with certainty that this happens. Unfortunately, moral educators since Aristotle’s time have added little to that observation except colourful metaphors, about the necessity of entering ‘the palace of Reason through the courtyard of Habit and Tradition’ (Peters, 1981, p. 52), or palatable analogies such as that the idea of critical moral thinking independent of a prior habituation process is ‘as incoherent as supposing that we should not encourage children to learn chords and scales on a piano until they have reached an age at which they are capable of composing music for themselves’ (Carr, 1991, p. 244; cf. Kristjánsson, 2006, pp. 187–188).

Practicalities aside, Aristotle does suggest that in order to take the step from habituated virtue to full virtue, we must learn to choose the right actions and emotions from ‘a firm and unchanging state’ of character (1985, p. 40 [1105a30–1105a34]): that is, after having submitted them to the arbitration of our own *phronesis*. On this view, truly virtuous persons not only perform the right actions, but they perform them for the right reasons and from the right motives:

knowing them, taking intrinsic pleasure in them and deciding that they are worthwhile. This process takes time, as those who have just learnt a virtue through habituation ‘do not yet know it, though they string the [correct] words together; for it must grow into them’ (Aristotle, 1985, p. 180 [1147a20–1147a22]).

At all events, Aristotle’s stringent condition about the eventual moral worth of virtuous activity – echoed by most contemporary character educationists – serves to defuse the myth that character education is essentially anti-intellectual and anti-democratic. For if it is, it is not really character *education* on the Aristotelian understanding at all, but rather character *conditioning*. If the complaint is, rather, that some particular programmes of character education – for instance, as practised in the USA in the 1990s – were delivered in an anti-intellectual and anti-democratic way, then this may well be the case. But so much the worse for those programmes and the students who were at the receiving end of them, rather than for character education as such.

#### *Myth 7: ‘The Emphasis on Character and Virtue is Conservative’*

Like the term ‘paternalistic’, ‘conservative’ is also contested and multi-layered. I refer to two of its possible meanings in this section but leave one (‘conservative’ as ‘individualistic’) until the next section on Myth 8.

The first and most obvious meaning of ‘conservative’ is ‘supportive of the *status quo*’. Is the emphasis on character, virtue and virtue education conservative in that sense? From a *political* perspective, this seems not to be the case at all. Martha Nussbaum (1990) has, for instance, argued convincingly that Aristotelian virtue-and-well-being theory, if transposed to the modern world, would have radically reformative and progressive implications, and that its practical policies would most probably resemble those of Scandinavian social democracies. From an *educational* perspective, it seems equally far-fetched to tar virtue-theories of an Aristotelian bent with service to the *status quo*. There is little doubt that the *status quo* in today’s education is a technicist, instrumentalist ‘what-works approach’ (Oancea and Pring, 2008; Arthur, 2003, p. 114). An Aristotelian character-based approach would, in contrast, highlight the role of normativity and values – not only within values education, but in all educational efforts – and prompt us to understand education itself non-instrumentally as a teleological *praxis* (cf. Biesta, 2010). It would also call for radical overhaul of the training of prospective teachers towards more explicit immersion in moral and cultural values: philosophy, art and literature (Carr, 1991). An approach can hardly be more anti-*status quo* than that.

Another meaning of ‘conservative’ is simply ‘inspired by, or in line with, the agenda of conservative political parties’. Here, to be sure, when US-style character education was first introduced in the late 1980s, one of its torchbearers was William Bennett, Education Secretary in the Reagan government, and it cannot be denied that he and many of his colleagues put their own ideological spin on the movement’s agenda. However, such connection to the political right seems to have been entirely contingent. If we look at the history of character-education initiatives in the United Kingdom, for instance, these have primarily been advocated by

liberals and progressives, harking back to the Scottish Enlightenment, the radicalism of Robert Owen and the secular humanists in the late Victorian era. In recent times, it was New Labour who first suggested that education had to take a moral turn (witness Tony Blair, influenced by people like Geoff Mulgan and Richard Layard) – although Tories (especially Steve Hilton, Oliver Letwin and PM David Cameron) have recently jumped on that same bandwagon. In any event, in UK political circles the order of the day seems to be that ‘we are all Aristotelians now’ (Arthur, 2003; Evans, 2011; History of Emotions Blog, 2012).

*Myth 8: ‘Character, Virtue and Virtue Education are Individualistic Notions’*

It may seem odd to fault Aristotelian ideas for individualism. Aristotle himself was anything but an individualist, claiming that the good life could only be realised in a certain kind of society with a certain kind of moral upbringing, public education and political arrangements (while not forgetting his insistence on the ‘moral luck’ of such circumstances). Nevertheless, contemporary efforts at virtue education commonly find themselves under attack for their inherently individualist bias. The idea of virtue is seen as focusing excessively or exclusively on the capacities and achievements of individual students apart from their socio-cultural contexts, thus neglecting issues of gender, class, ethnicity and power relations. Conversely, vice is allegedly located in individual failings rather than in social, economic and political structures – and improvement is sought through personal change (or ‘kid-fixing’) rather than political reform.

I have elsewhere criticised these objections as directed, first, at US-style character education of the 1990s and, second, at current positive psychological virtue theory. The reason for the apparent foregrounding of inward gaze and personal achievement in both movements seems to be the same, at least if its advocates are to be taken at their word. They all claim that the question of individual versus societal reform is a chicken-and-egg one – we need to start somewhere and, for developmental and pragmatic reasons, it is more feasible to start with the individual child, student or classroom than the whole school system or society at large: *developmentally* because the emotional underpinnings of the virtues are first activated in close personal encounters and only later extended to societal concern; and *pragmatically* because individual manoeuvres are simply easier to administer in the first place than large-scale institutional transformations. Both in US-style character education and positive psychology, the eventual goal is, however, said to be ‘social change’ or the ‘creation of positive institutions’ (see citations and discussions in Kristjánsson, 2006, pp. 188–189; 2013, chap. 2.5). Once again, the charge in question turns out to be a myth.

*Myth 9: ‘Character and Virtue are Essentially Relative Notions’*

The obvious question to ask here is *what* those notions are supposed to be relative *to*? One initially plausible answer might be: to a particular moral theory – a theory that, in turn, we cannot take for granted that everyone shares.

Now, it is beyond controversy that most recent inroads into virtue education have been directly or indirectly inspired by *virtue ethics* – a type of moral theory, with firm roots in antiquity, which has lately re-emerged as a serious contender to Kantianism and utilitarianism. According to such virtue ethics, an action is right not because it can be universalised in light of a rational principle (Kantianism) or because it makes the greatest number of people happy (utilitarianism), but because it enhances virtue as moral character and contributes to a flourishing life – as opposed to a languishing or floundering one. Indeed, the focus is no longer on the ‘deontic’ correctness of individual actions, but rather on their ‘aretaic’ role in the well-rounded life and their roots in the ‘inner world’ of the agent; in stable states of character that incorporate motivational and emotional elements. What matters in the end for moral evaluation is not merely observable behaviour, but the emotions with which an action is performed, the motivation behind it and the manner in which it is performed.

Fashionable as virtue ethics is in many quarters, it has also been much frowned upon for alleged self-centredness and failure to give precise action-guidance in dilemmatic situations (Kristjánsson, 2002, pp. 63–76). So if the current attention to character, virtue and virtue education were conditional upon the acceptance of virtue ethics in this narrow sense – as designating a particular, contestable moral theory – one could indeed argue that such attention was unduly theory-relative. There is, however, another and more inclusive understanding of the term ‘virtue ethics’ where it refers simply to the thesis that a person cannot live a well-rounded and overall satisfactory life without practising moral virtue. In this permissive sense, one could say that almost all historical moral theories – in addition to virtue ethics in the narrow sense – are virtue ethical, for if any creed can be said to have stood the test of time in moral theory, it is the judgement of wise and competent judges, wherever you go, that virtues are constitutive of the good life. Clearly, Confucianism is virtue ethical in this sense (Yu, 2007), as also is utilitarianism (at least on John Stuart Mill’s understanding) and even arguably Kantianism (which has its own constrictive virtue theory) – although the last two do not *ground* ultimate moral rightness in virtuous character. It is precisely because of this broad, if uneasy, consensus that Martha Nussbaum (1999) demurs at the term ‘virtue ethics’, as reserved for a special moral theory, and believes that it designates a ‘misleading category’. So while it may be possible to identify some fundamentalist divine-command theories of morality or versions of Kantianism – entailing extreme emotional disengagement from morality – as not virtue-ethical, we need not generally worry that a focus on character, virtue and virtue education must remain relative to, and contingent upon, the acceptance of a particular moral theory.

Less easy to deflect is the challenge posed by *cultural* relativism. This should not be surprising, since relativism is the proverbial spectre haunting all moral theorising since the time of the Greek sophists. Some virtue ethicists have not so much tried to lay it to rest as to take it on board, most notably Alasdair MacIntyre (1981). According to his social constructivist interpretation, virtues (and vices) differ over

times and societies or, more specifically, among the prevailing social practices of different cultures. Nevertheless, a more common tack taken in contemporary virtue ethics is to follow Aristotle's empirical universalism/cosmopolitanism about human nature, captured in his much-quoted observation that 'in our travels we can see how every human being is akin [ . . . ] to a human being' (1985, p. 208 [1155a20–1155a22]). The case for such anti-relativism has recently been bolstered considerably by extensive empirical work in positive psychology on conceptions of virtues in different societies, religions and moral systems. In light of this work, positive psychologists claim that people are more or less the same wherever they go, and that the spheres of human life wherein our virtues and vices play out have remained essentially constant throughout history (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). Perhaps little more than a thought experiment would have sufficed to elicit that same conclusion, for it is surely impossible to envisage human societies where character strengths such as conscientiousness or courage are not needed, recognised or held to be of value (see Carr, 1991, p. 6). This does not mean that there cannot be varying interpretations or instantiations of a virtue, given different circumstances in different societies. But then again, in some societies people drive on the right side of the road, in some on the left; yet clearly it would be a myth to claim that there is no such thing as the general skill of a good driver (cf. Carr, 1996, p. 359).

*Myth 10: 'Character and Virtue are Entirely Situation Specific'*

It is currently fashionable to claim that moral situationism, more than moral relativism, is where theories of virtue and virtue education come unstuck. Situationists say that there is no such thing as stable and consistent states of virtues and vices, making up character; rather, all human behaviour ('moral' or otherwise) has now been shown in psychological experiments, such as the famous Milgram experiments, to be completely situation dependent. While I have elsewhere criticised situationism (Kristjánsson, 2010, pp. 128–147; 2013), let me give it the credit that it deserves. First, all personality psychologists seem nowadays to agree that behaviour is a function both of character and situations. In other words, since situations are the arena where character plays out, it would be a conceptual, no less than empirical, error to maintain that character is completely situation independent. Second, it seems undeniable that the point of good virtue education is not only to help students develop virtuous traits; it is also to teach them to learn to steer clear of perilous situations with which they have no prior familiarity and which might land them in trouble – given the common-sense dictum that the more extraordinary features a situation presents, the more extraordinary and 'out of character' our reactions may be.

These moderate concessions aside, virtue ethicists have arguably sufficient weaponry in their arsenal to rebut the situationist challenge. The virtue ethical response typically culminates in an *anti-behaviouristic objection*, observing that the mere fact that an agent is seen to do *X* or not *X* in an experiment says nothing

about whether that person possesses a robust character state of virtue or vice. In light of the characterisations of ‘virtue’ and ‘vice’ from the section on Myth 1, we need to know about the *spirit* in which the action was performed or not performed, its *emotional concomitants* and the *manner* in which the action or non-action was conducted (see further in Kristjánsson, 2010, pp. 128–147).

However, there is an even more fundamental problem of which the situationist challenge falls afoul, which has to do with the very concept of a ‘situation’. Situations can range from the narrowest (‘picking up papers that someone has dropped in front of a telephone booth after you have found a coin in the booth’) to the broadest (‘being a citizen in Nazi Germany’). Typically, situationists deliberately choose to focus on situations that are not only *broad* but also *passive* (the agent is a victim rather than a creator of the situation), *extraordinary* (the situation presents features that the agent has never experienced before and is never even likely to experience in real life) and/or involve *strong* social expectations of compliance (for instance, being subjected to orders from an authority-figure). After tilting evidence in their favour in this way, it is no surprise that situationist experiments yield the findings that they do. This is not even a matter that requires empirical corroboration; rather, it is what the very terms ‘broad’, ‘passive’, ‘extraordinary’ and ‘strong’ *mean* when applied to situations. They are used in our language precisely to denote classes of situations where people’s reactions are less easily predictable than they normally are (Kristjánsson, 2013, chap. 6). We should not labour under the illusion that evidence gathered in this way poses a serious threat to the ideas of character, virtue and virtue education as such.

### 3. SOME WELL-FOUNDED MISGIVINGS

I do not want to create the impression that there are obvious common-sense answers to all the objections that can be levelled at practical virtue ethics, and that the people who are currently engaged in virtue-based educational research can simply adopt a cavalier gung-ho approach to them. For all I have said so far, there might be remaining misgivings that are more difficult to handle than those already addressed. I now turn to three of these in the final sections of this paper.

#### *‘The History of Virtue Educational Initiatives does not Augur Well for the Prospects of Future Ones’*

Speaking from a practical UK-based context, James Arthur laments that Britain has ‘a long history of ill-conceived and ineffective efforts at character education’ (2003, p. 24). One difficulty lies in the endless flavour-of-the-month varieties that have been on offer, one after the other, which have created a dismissive cry-wolf attitude among teacher as well as simple initiative fatigue. The lack of a common language in which those efforts have been couched has not made life easier either. As we know, educational theory ‘has a liability to lurch from one term to

another' (Haldane, 2010, p. xi), and moral education theory is no exception. Thus, we urgently need a passkey – some sort of a moral GPS – to guide us through the labyrinth of terms, theories and approaches (cf. Berkowitz, 2012).

In this regard, all serviceable work in the area of virtue education nowadays needs to be *interdisciplinary*: to integrate insights from philosophy, psychology and education. In the present context, we need as a matter of urgency to acknowledge that there cannot be a serviceable social scientific theory of virtue or of its constitutive elements without significant input from philosophical virtue ethics, any more than there can be a reasonably developed philosophical theory of virtue without grounding in the empirical knowledge of how people actually think about virtues and the way virtues actually inform their character. However, this acknowledgement may be a hard bullet to bite for many academics and practitioners.

*'The Study of Virtue and Character Lacks a Clear Empirical Methodology'*

Virtue ethics is a type of *moral naturalism*. Moral naturalists are realists about morality; they believe that such moral properties as honesty or wickedness really are features of the natural world (on a par with such other ordinary properties as swiftness, redness and slipperiness) or, more specifically, constitute ingredients of biologically evolved human psychology and conduct. For the naturalist, judgements about moral life are true if they correspond to this natural reality, false if they do not. The great majority of existing instruments to measure character – for instance, the positive psychological Values in Action instruments for youth and adults (Park and Peterson, 2006) – are, however, simple self-report questionnaires. Self-report measures are typically grounded in anti-realism or, more specifically, attributionism about the human self, according to which the self is the same as self-concept or the set of beliefs we attribute to the self. Moral naturalists complain about possible response biases in such measures caused by self-deceptions and self-fabulations. Even if I consistently think I am a duck, this does not make me a duck (Kristjánsson, 2010, pp. 25–52).

In response, the anti-realist may ask what sorts of measures the realist has then devised to measure, say, objective moral virtue (rather than simply people's own conceptions of how virtuous they are), and the answer is not readily forthcoming. The realist may suggest triangulation via reports of peers and significant others (teachers, parents, siblings, etc.), but the snag is now that even if not only I think I am a duck but other people too, this still does not make me a duck. Multiple observations of the person (e.g. on multiple occasions or in multiple contexts) may be helpful, but longitudinal observation methods are time-consuming, costly and difficult to administer. To cut a long story short, no tried-and-tested instruments to measure moral character – on a naturalist–realist conception – seem to exist. That lacuna calls any virtue educational school interventions into question, as those will ideally need – to establish scientific credibility – pre-tests and post tests of

impact on moral virtue. At best, such impact can now be measured by relying on anecdotal evidence or using instruments that the naturalist–realist deems, in principle, inadequate.

I see no other way out of this predicament for current character educators and virtue researchers than to try to design their own tests for measuring virtue – or at least to search for eclectic multi-criterial combinations of already existing measures that work better in tandem than individually (cf. Kristjánsson, 2010, pp. 51–52). To complicate matters, such measures need to be age specific, as young people will exhibit different virtues at different stages of their moral development. Given the current state of play, there is clearly good reason to remain circumspect about such methodological issues.

*'We Know Very Little about the Impact of Previous Interventions in this Field'*

Until recently, one might have been excused for thinking that serious scholarship was automatically on holiday when it came to evaluations of existing programmes of character education. In the last few years, meta-analyses of impact have started to appear – some presenting positive results and helpful recommendations about 'what works' in character education (Berkowitz and Bier, 2006; Lovat *et al.*, 2009; Durlak *et al.*, 2011). Hampering such studies, however, is the methodological issue discussed in the previous section. In referring to effectiveness, this is generally measured via self-reports or other reports rather than more objective criteria. When purely objective criteria are invoked – for example, the number of violent incidents in the school yard or the number of students found carrying knives – questions remain about how to interpret positive findings: Do they really mean that there has been an improvement in virtue/character, or only that students have devised better ways of not being found out? On the other hand, we could decide to be more charitable and say that if a programme of character education has had a marked positive effect on school ethos, as measured by some objective standards, we should simply be thankful for that and not worry too much about the underlying mechanisms.

Once again, however, healthy realism about the short-term effects of virtue education seems advisable. In the British context, for example, it does well to remember that the best effects of virtue education programmes have usually been recorded in private schools. But only 7% of children presently attend such schools in the United Kingdom.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have explored various well-known and often-repeated anti-virtue catechisms, stating that the notions of character, virtue and virtue education are *unclear, redundant, old-fashioned, religious, paternalistic, anti-democratic, conservative, individualistic, relative and situation dependent*. I have challenged these misgivings and exposed them as industriously propagated 'myths'. On the

other hand, I ended the paper on a more conciliatory note by acknowledging three well-founded misgivings – *historical*, *methodological* and *practical* – about the notions in question.

If efforts at virtue research and development are endangered by underestimation of possible impact, they are no less crippled by overestimation. Well-founded misgivings about virtue education do remain – although those are not the misgivings most commonly highlighted by sceptics. To conclude, we need to take the long view and tread carefully over a bumpy terrain – although that is not the same as treading timidly. At all events, the ambitious transformative aims of current efforts at virtue education, however laudable, need to be mitigated by a substantive dose of intellectual modesty.

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