

Character education and the instability of virtue

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Abstract

Character education in schools in England is flourishing. I give many examples of the enthusiasm for it as well as drawing attention to the UK government's new ambivalence towards it. Character education seems largely impervious to the many criticisms to which it has been subjected. I touch on these only briefly as my focus is on a criticism that has received little coverage. This is because the virtues on offer are unstable. They are best understood as sites on which we contest our understanding of what it is to be a good person rather than reach conclusive answers. There is support for this argument in Aristotle, notwithstanding its many oddities and those of some modern uses of his conception of the virtues. The proliferation of the virtues in the practice and theory of education today is, I suggest, a sign of weakness and not of strength, while the very instability of the virtues demands that they be continually discussed and debated. This places them at the heart of any vision of education worth having.

KEYWORDS

Aristotle, character, ethics, virtue

'...there are just too many different and incompatible conceptions of a virtue for there to be any real unity to the concept or indeed to the history.'

Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (1981, p. 169)

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INTRODUCTION

Character education that focuses on the virtues shows many signs of flourishing in England today.¹ Many primary and secondary schools offer such character education programmes: There are numerous examples below. Two universities have strong research centres devoted to the topic. Birmingham University's Jubilee for Character and Virtues is this year (2022) celebrating its 10th anniversary. It enjoys substantial sponsorship from the John Templeton Foundation, employs nearly 20 full-time staff and is responsible for a steady stream of sophisticated research publications.² Leeds University hosts a project on the 'Narnian Virtues', that is, virtues that are arguably demonstrated by the children in the series of books by C. S. Lewis that begins with *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. It, too, is sponsored by the John Templeton Foundation.

In policy terms, the high point of character education was perhaps in December 2014 when the then UK Secretary of State for Education, Nicky Morgan, announced a £3.5 million Character Grant scheme for schools, declaring that it was a 'landmark step in our education system'. It was designed to help ensure pupils develop character traits such as perseverance, resilience, grit, confidence, optimism, honesty, integrity, dignity and many others (Department for Education, 2015). As recently as August 2017, official reports suggested the policy was still intact, though increasing talk of 'character skills' (e.g., 'Developing character skills in schools'; Department for Education, 2017) was perhaps a warning. In October 2017, a new Education Secretary, Justine Greening, announced the closure of the government-sponsored character education programme. It was to be replaced by a '£22m Essential Life Skills programme restricted to 12 Opportunity Areas—parts of the country which have been identified as social mobility "cold spots"' (Times Educational Supplement, 2017).

The most recent government advice, *Character Education Framework Guidance* (Department for Education, 2019), appears at first sight to celebrate the teaching of character virtues, listing the examples of respect, truthfulness, courage and generosity (p. 4 para. 7) and courage, honesty, generosity, integrity, humility and a sense of justice (p. 7 para 14). Fostering these is said to be one way of promoting the 'spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development of pupils' (p. 4 para 6) which, unlike character education itself, schools have a 'statutory duty' (p. 4 para 6) to ensure, suggesting that character education is merely ancillary to SMSC. If individual schools or trusts do offer character education, they are free 'to decide what constitutes good provision and to be accountable for it' (p. 6 para 11). There is 'no requirement for any data on character education to be sent to the Department for Education' (p. 11 para 26), and the demands made on school staff should be taken into account: They 'need to be proportionate and should not lead to additional workload' (p. 6). Thus, character education can easily be dispensed with in the face of other priorities that schools face, as long as they have other ways of promoting pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

It seems strange, in that case, that *Character Education Framework Guidance* offers 10 examples of character virtue (above), as if by encouragement. Or perhaps we should read this as 'if schools really must, these are some of the virtues they might look at'. But then why, from this list and its 2015 predecessor, do only courage and generosity appear in both? Why might one school focus on humility and generosity, say, while another school does not? Is generosity particularly needed in Leeds, perhaps, but not in Manchester, while humility is just the thing for the children of rural Somerset but not those of Sheffield? What evidence could there be either for or against this? The proliferation increases. Short 'case studies' of 15 schools take up pages 19–27 of Annex B. Among them these schools claim to focus on 25 particular virtues of character. The degree of variation is considerable, and often total. Only four virtues appear to be celebrated in more than one school: integrity (two), respect (three), justice (two) and resilience (three). Of those given as examples on pages 4 and 7 (above), courtesy, truthfulness, courage, generosity and humility do not appear at all in the case studies. Charity makes an appearance, but it is impossible to know whether this is the same as generosity, or something more like respect and love for one's fellow human beings, the *agape* that Paul writes about in his epistle (1.13) to the Corinthians. (As the school that names it as a quality it seeks to develop in pupils is a Catholic Primary, it seems likely that it is the latter.) Thus, we find no less than 30 virtues instanced in this 'guidance'.

Many more examples can be found of the character traits that individual schools claim to be promoting. The following come from *Leading Character Education in Schools* (NERF, 2017). A primary school in Middlesbrough includes

gumption, leadership and initiative. A secondary school in Stoke-on-Trent includes creativity and compassion. One in Hertfordshire includes self-regulation and quality. One in Essex includes independent thinking. A Hull primary school is the place to send your children if you want them to acquire the character traits of teamwork, risk management and negotiating and influencing. Clearly, the concept of a trait or virtue of character is being stretched to breaking point in places. The last school above seems to be thinking of skills rather than virtues, and strange ones for primary children too.

No doubt schools should not be blamed if in a neoliberal society where they are increasingly independent of local control and in competition with each other they try to come up with unique selling points. But the purpose of character education can hardly be to develop just any traits of character, even where they are properly so-called. MacIntyre, in the quotation that prefixes this paper, writes that there are 'just too many different and incompatible conceptions of a virtue for there to be any real unity to the concept'. Proliferation on this scale is not a strength of character education but its fatal weakness, especially when justification is seldom offered for any particular selection. Furthermore, as I explain in the following section, even where virtues bear the same name, there is no guarantee that they are being understood in the same way. I noted this above in the case of 'charity'. Another vivid example comes from a secondary school in Norfolk that valued gratitude so highly that it made it compulsory. Its behaviour guidelines originally (they have been revised following protests by parents) read: 'Pupils who do not say thank you as they leave the lesson are choosing to be rude. They will be punished' (Tickle, 2017). Compulsory gratitude, it might have been supposed, is not gratitude at all.

Character education in schools proceeds in the face of such oddities as these. Here are a few more criticisms. First, it can be plausibly maintained that schools exist primarily for the acquisition of knowledge, skills and understanding, and not for the education of character, which is the business of the family and voluntary movements such as the Scouts and Guides, churches and other religious institutions, sports clubs and special interest groups of various kinds.

Second, it is a familiar point that our virtues tend to be context-specific. Peter is devoted to his dog and his local football team: less so to his wife and children (or, of course, vice versa). Olivia is scrupulous in attention to detail in her work as a solicitor but barely glances at the fine print of the personal loan agreement she signs. Jake is intensely loyal to his neighbourhood gang but shows no loyalty to the school he intermittently attends. The concentration camp guard is a civilised family man in the evenings but a monster in his work during the day. The infamous Stanford prison experiment (Haney et al., 1973) has become an emblem of what are sometimes called the 'situational variables' that govern our tendency 'to be specialists in morals, as if we had a limited amount of moral energy, and could not spread it over the whole field' (Murdoch, 1992, p. 293).

Third, there can never be good evidence for claiming that character education works, if by this is meant that it has long-term beneficial effects on the development of individuals' character. Research to determine this empirically is simply impossible. This is partly because there is no way of discovering which of a person's attributes come from his schooling and which from the numerous other influences on him: family, friends, peer-group, religious affiliations, books, media, online chat groups, and so on (see above). The difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that it is also partly because character education is not supposed to be effective mainly or only in the short term. As Curren (2017, p. 12) notes, 'To say that a state of character is a stable attribute implies that it endures over time'. Research would have to track the behaviour of many individuals over a considerable length of time, presumably well into adulthood. Davis (2003, p. 39) memorably describes the impossibility of doing this: 'Perhaps only a miniature social scientist perched on the shoulder of a former student day and night, year after year, is likely to learn his true character'. Davis reminds us too that there would have to be many long-term individual studies of this kind, comparing adults who had been exposed to character education with those who had not. Furthermore, the observation would have to be covert, because, as he puts it, character is 'what we do when we think no one is watching'—and no funding or authorising body is likely to approve research that does not have the consent of the research subject.

Fourth, there is what Suissa (2015, p. 110) calls a 'complete expunging of the language of politics' from the 'rhetoric' of character education. When the 'profound pluralism' of most modern societies calls us to find 'a way in which diverse communities of citizens can live together' (Jerome & Kisby, 2019, p. 14), character education commits itself to

individualism, asking what are the virtues that we would want a young person to develop irrespective of the social world he or she comes from. Of course these virtues of the individual have implications for how he or she will treat other people, but there is a fundamentally atomistic line of thinking here, typical of western societies of our time. It is important to note here that both Suissa, and Jerome and Kisby, as well as giving extensive account of the apolitical nature of most projects of character education, also develop many of the criticisms that I have touched on above.

INSTABILITY

The problem of instability is especially interesting because while it effectively destroys the case for systematic school programmes of character education, it strengthens the case for helping young people to understand the virtues and vices, and to think about the kind of person it is good or bad to be. The instability of the character virtues lies in the way that each virtue is, for the most part, close—within touching distance one might say—to its corresponding vice or vices, that is, close to getting things very wrong. This is Aristotle's account of the virtues: as lying in the mean between vices (*Nicomachean Ethics* II–V). The point can be illustrated by the case of humility, which figures in several of the lists cited above. Humility can be a fine quality: The humble person eschews self-aggrandisement, the demand of the modern world that we 'big ourselves up'; she or he avoids boasting and quietly gets on with the job in hand. It is a virtue whose merits we can understand the more we look at the arrogant, egotistical behaviour of many men, some in high political office around the world, not least towards women. At the same time, however, humility can sometimes appear as a cause for concern. It may seem to manifest itself in what we call 'painful shyness', a worrying lack of self-confidence. Low self-esteem may be diagnosed, and counselling is recommended.

Here, as often, literature offers us an opportunity for the kind of analysis that deepens our understanding. Fanny Price, in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, repays study here. Fanny has been sent away from her chaotic Portsmouth home to live with her cousins on the grander side of the family, in order to improve her prospects in life. She is acutely aware of her lowly status, not least because Aunt Norris, another resident of the great house that gives the novel its title, regularly reminds her of it. Jane Austen describes Fanny as 'exceedingly timid and shy, and shrinking from notice' (ch. 2). Many readers have considered her insipid (Jane Austen's own mother used this term of Fanny). Kingsley Amis went so far as to find her 'morally detestable' and 'sycophantic' (1963, p. 142). Yet, her cousin Edmund, whose impending destiny as a clergyman is presumably a sign of his maturity and right-mindedness, appreciates the considerate and gentle side of her humility enough to marry her at the novel's end. It is not simply that some readers take one view of Fanny while other readers see her differently, nor is it just that the 19th century looked for a different balance of qualities in a young woman than we do today, though this is no doubt true: the decline of religion alone has caused many of the character virtues to be re-assessed. Rather, the responsive reader sees Fanny's humility in different lights as the novel proceeds. The virtue is revealed as complex and multi-faceted: So much so that it is sometimes hard to distinguish from the vices of excessive deference and self-effacement at one extreme and at the other a little too much self-regard—if we thought, say, that Fanny made too much of a point about her humility. There is, then, no clearly defined mean for humility to occupy, no secure and stable virtue that can be conclusively defined and recommended without qualification. We owe to Nietzsche (1996, II. 13) the insight that 'only something which has no history can be defined': a principle accepted by major dictionaries such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), which set out the different meanings that words have had over time, and do not stipulate any one of them as the sole correct meaning.

A second example is supplied by the primary school that listed 'gumption' among its recommended character virtues. The OED lists as its main meanings 'Common sense, mother wit, shrewdness. Also, initiative, enterprise, "drive"'. This word has an interesting history. It seems to have enjoyed popularity around the turn of the 19th century, especially in British (mainly boys') boarding-school stories, where it labels among other qualities the willingness to break school rules and take the consequences if found out. Thus, gumption had a rather different connotation a hundred and more years ago than it has for us now, notwithstanding the fact that even today many teachers talk about their naughty pupils with affection (it has to be the right kind of naughtiness, of course) while to others—those who would

make thanking the teacher at the end of the lesson compulsory, perhaps—every infringement of the rules is anathema. How the Middlesbrough primary school (above) that included gumption in its menu of character traits understood the term is not something we can know simply by seeing the word in their list. It has a history, and it is not clear which part of its history the school is drawing on.

We can go further than this. It is not just that, as MacIntyre notes (Prefix, above), there is a strong case for wondering if there are too many different and incompatible conceptions of a virtue, nor is it only that the various lists of the virtues often express a different theory about what a virtue is (*After Virtue*, 1981, p. 171). The crux of the problem for those attempting to come up with widely acceptable lists of the virtues as a basis for character education is that the virtues are prominent among the sites on which our visions of what it is to be a good or bad person are contested. This too, as Nietzsche reminds us (above), is their history.

These contestations are a theme of European literature from the beginning. Homer's *Iliad* begins with the poet's invocation of the muse: to sing of the destructive wrath (*mēnin*) of Achilles, son of Peleus, and the woes it brought down on the Greeks fighting in the war against Troy. It will be recalled that Achilles had gone out with a raiding party of his Special Forces, the Myrmidons. Finding a girl, Briseis, working as an attendant at a temple of Apollo, he appropriated her as part of the legitimate spoils of war and his by right. However, Agamemnon, the supreme commander of the Greek forces at Troy, asserted his seniority and took the girl as his. Achilles was consumed with what many of the translations style as 'wrath'. He refused to fight alongside the Greeks even though he knew of the prophecy that Troy would never fall unless he rejoined the battle. Apollo, whose temple Achilles had violated, sent a plague to afflict the Greek army, but still Achilles would not relent. In the 'shame culture' of the heroes of the *Iliad*, where honour is the highest value and losing face is intolerable (Dodds, 1951), Achilles's anger at Agamemnon's high-handedness is part of a warrior's virtue. (For the ancient Greeks, virtue, *aretē*, was a property exclusive to men.) But in the *Odyssey*, Homer depicts a world that is beginning to move away from a predominantly shame culture into one that feels the pull of other values. Odysseus, in his long journey back from Troy, is inspired more by his longing for his home and family than by his desire for glory, and he learns to use cunning rather than just brute force, for example in disguising himself as a beggar when he reaches Ithaca.

In modern times, Jane Austen contests what are the virtues of a good woman, one deserving a respectable husband. Austen moves away from the idea of 'virtue as a code of rules ... which one either obeyed or disobeyed ... which for women had to do primarily with sexual virtue' (Emsley, 2005, p. 3) and which implied habits of deference and meekness. Her heroines have tougher virtues: for example, Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* stands up to her father, to Lady Catherine and to Darcy, whom she shocks and dismays with the cold anger with which she rejects his first proposal of marriage (ch. 34). In our own time, some responses to the #MeToo movement seem to show similar dismay at women's refusal to be submissive in the face of harassment. The 'womanly virtues', in short, are still being contested: more than that, the correlation between gender and particular virtues now looks increasingly problematic.

As for the virtues of schoolchildren (schoolboys, at any rate), the writer Rudyard Kipling comes down emphatically in favour of them breaking the rules and not just following them obediently. The boys' virtues include the traditional 'stiff upper lip' and cunningness, a quality that gives the title of Kipling's book of school stories, *Stalky & Co* (1899), and supplies Stalky, the book's hero, with his nickname: 'Stalky' means 'cunning' in the schoolboys' slang. This and similar qualities will be vital to the boys when they are eventually commissioned as officers in the armies of the British Empire and called on to fight and die for it: Kipling makes this clear in the last chapter of the book. He knows that this is contested territory. In one of the chapters of *Stalky & Co.*, ironically titled 'The moral reformers', Stalky and his friends reject a school culture of pious obedience and brotherly love, which they call 'bestly Erickin'. The reference is to Frederic Farrar's novel, *Eric, or Little by Little* (1885), which, in its author's own words, is dedicated to the 'inculcation of inward purity and moral purpose'. Young Eric commits minor transgressions, such as drinking an illicit glass of brandy and water with his schoolmates. Small transgressions lead to greater ones, little by little in the words of the title, until Eric is in so much trouble that he runs away to sea. Things do not end well. This contestation of school virtues continues across more than a century of British school stories and has been represented vividly in the world of Hogwarts, where Harry Potter and his friends (including a girl, at last) sneak out after dark to put the wizarding world to rights.

A quick search of the internet reveals that although there are many who relish the high spirits and cunning of Harry and his friends, there are others who see their disobedience and 'dabbling in the occult' not merely as reprehensible but as evil. In many UK schools now that regard the good school student as one who complies with their zero-tolerance discipline policy, children emulating Stalky and Harry face drastic sanctions, including exclusion.

Now if the virtues are best thought of as sites of contestation, then there is all the more reason, it might be said, for engaging students in school in discussion about the virtues and vices. All kinds of literature lend themselves to such discussion, from *Frog and Toad Are Friends* (Lobel, 1970) through young teenage fiction (e.g., the adventures of Tracy Beaker, another rule-breaker: see Wilson & Sharrat, 1991) and on to texts prescribed for the A-level syllabus for students in the last years of secondary school (which often include the novels of Jane Austen). This is the kind of character education that seems to me highly desirable. There are, however, two reservations to be made. The first is that discussion is likely to be elementary until children have reached a level of maturity. Although children can surprise us with their perspicuity, it would be remarkable if primary pupils could discuss, say, the first three of the 'Knightly virtues'—humility, honesty, love—in any but a superficial way. It is striking that although the 'Knightly virtues' also include service, self-discipline and gratitude, the group photograph on page vi of Carr and Harrison's (2015) book about children who have been learning about these virtues suggests that what has interested them is weapons and armour. On the right of the picture a boy is holding a sword; on the left, a girl holds a shield.

The second reservation is that although the advocates of character education might reply that it is precisely debate—concerning what is and what is not humility, honesty and so on—that they want to encourage, since such a debate is precisely an education in character, this is at odds with the moral theory on which they rest their case for the primacy of the virtues. For example, Carr and Harrison (2015) note that humility may be valued differently in different traditions of western thought. Of course, this is true. But the idea only leads them to suggest that there is a

danger of moving—in the manner of socially and historically constructed conceptions of moral virtue ... — from the observation that some society did not *consider* humility (or whatever) to be a virtue to the conclusion that humility was not or could not have *been* a virtue in any such context. (p. 99, emphases in original)

Thus, they appear to insist that humility could still be a virtue at a particular point in time and place even if few or no people regarded it as a virtue then. This theory is sometimes called 'moral realism'. Kristjánsson (2013a, p. 89) points up the implausibility of this theory by describing it as amounting to the claim that 'moral facts exist as such, independent of any human attitudes, beliefs or feelings, in a transcendental realm of ideas (Platonism), woven into the fabric of rationality (Kantianism or simply in the nature around us (Aristotelianism)'. But his own preferred version of moral *naturalism* seems similar: 'Moral naturalists are realists about morality; they believe that such moral properties as honesty or wickedness really are features of the natural world' (2013b, p. 15).

The instability of the virtues tells strongly against such versions of moral naturalism or realism, and is exemplified vividly in those cases where according to Aristotle the virtues do not even have a name. He writes of several cases where, although we seem to be confident about naming the vices that appear at the extremes, there is no readily named virtue at the mean. Ambition is one example: 'We blame both the ambitious man as aiming at honour more than is right and from wrong sources, and the unambitious man as not willing to be honoured even for noble reasons' (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1125b8–11), but 'the mean has not received a name' (1125b25).³ Ross translates as 'ambitious' the word, *philotimos*, whose literal meaning is 'lover of honour', which is how Thomson (1978) translates it. This makes sense of the overly ambitious man: he wants promotion or election to office less for job satisfaction or because it will enable him to improve the lives of his fellow citizens than for the sake of status. The unambitious man, on the other hand, has little or no interest in status. It sounds strange to us now to call this a vice, because alongside elements of the Aristotelian tradition and our relatively new modern hero, the buccaneering entrepreneur, we have inherited from Christianity respect for those who conceive their work as service without expectation of worldly recognition. The recent pandemic has reminded us, in the UK, of the worth of such people, from care workers to delivery drivers.

John Williams's 1965 novel *Stoner* (Williams, 2012) richly describes the work of an American college lecturer who pursues his career in this spirit.⁴ Even in Aristotle's time, however, the Greeks seem to have felt the pull of the old ideal of the *kalos k'agathos*, the 'handsome and good man',⁵ whose all-round excellence naturally confers status on him even if he does not pursue it in the single-minded manner of Homer's Achilles. Where a culture is pulled in different directions by the traditions it inherits, it is unsurprising that it finds it difficult to identify the virtues at the centre between the extremes.

Another of Aristotle's examples of a virtue without a name is 'the mean opposed to boastfulness' (1127a13). In assessing truthfulness, he writes, we find at one extreme the vice of excess, which is boastfulness (*alazoneia*), while at the other extreme is the vice of deficiency. The Greek word for this is *eirōneia*, which is usually translated as 'mock-modesty', sometimes as 'irony', which derives from the Greek word, and sometimes as 'self-depreciation'. We are not used to thinking of this—whichever translation we choose—as a vice, and Aristotle seems in two minds about it. He notes that mock-modest people who understate subtly are more attractive in character than boastful people, and generally 'make a pleasant impression' rather than the opposite. He mentions Socrates as one who disclaimed 'qualities which bring reputation', with implicit approval for what has become known as Socratic irony. Irony or mock-modesty, then, does not appear to Aristotle to be much of a vice. It is also strange to think of boastfulness and mock-modesty or irony as vices of untruthfulness. Is it not rather the egotism of boastfulness that is unpleasant, and the sense that the mock-modest man is ostentatious about his lack of ostentation?⁶ It is likely that Aristotle was living through a period when 'irony' was changing its meaning: from the classical Greek sense of a form of untruthfulness, even deceit (which often enabled its practitioner to get the better of the boastful man) to the Socratic sense in which it was less a way of speaking than of admitting 'a peculiar form of not knowing into one's life with the virtues' (Lear, 2011, p. 62) and welcoming the disruption to the soul that comes from seeing through the pretence of customary practices and values.

We have here, then, some examples of virtues and vices that have manifestly not only changed over time but defeated Aristotle, the virtuoso of the virtues, in his attempts to identify them clearly. It is thus very hard to see them as real 'features of the natural world' as Kristjánsson asserts, each a cast-iron property, a 'natural kind', independent of how people think of them, like iron, the moon or the hippopotamus. Quite apart from the oddness of this viewpoint, it hardly constitutes grounds for a debate about the nature of any particular virtue. In fact, it closes the debate down. There is little room for arguing about what is and what is not a hippopotamus.

EPISTEMIC VIRTUES

These problems and difficulties go some way to explaining the turn to virtue epistemology and recent interest in the specifically epistemic virtues. These, such as intellectual tenacity, attentiveness and inquisitiveness, do at least look like suitable qualities for education to concern itself with. They appear more central to the work of the school and the university, and less like optional bolt-ons contingent on the whims of various educationists, pressure groups and wealthy philanthropists. Virtue epistemology, however, brings with it problems of its own. It is not easy to make a sharp division between epistemic virtues and wider virtues of character. This is especially the case for those 'responsibilist' virtue epistemologists who regard intellectual virtues, such as carefulness, thoroughness and intellectual courage, as first and foremost the traits of a responsible person, rather than above all as truth-conducive. This just brings many of the problems I have identified in the character virtues round again.

The epistemic virtues, too, come up against what I have called above the problem of instability. Just like moral virtues, they are insecure. They are not firm and established. Intellectual thoroughness, for example, is not easy to distinguish from the crippling perfectionism that drives some academics to polish a journal article again and again before submitting it for review. 'Again and again' sounds as if it might be commendable; but how many 'agains' does it take before we begin to worry about the writer's state of mind? The fact that there is no clear answer to this question only strengthens my point here. Accuracy is surely commendable, if the lack of it is slovenliness. Yet, one person's defender of standards is another's pedant. I confess to being unsure quite where I fall when I inveigh against the use of 'within'

where 'in' will do perfectly well, or 'impact' without the accompanying 'on', or when I insist on the cedilla in a student's essay on Jean-François Lyotard.

Again literature, and particularly some of the English 19th-century novelists, handles the instability of the epistemic virtues with great insight. Elizabeth Bennet, in *Pride and Prejudice* (which once more illustrates the difficulty of separating the epistemic virtues from the moral ones), has a quick mind: but she represents the 'prejudice' of the title, making her judgements, accurate though they tend to be, rather too precipitously. Intellectual virtue and a kind of vice are very close to each other here, as well as an element of dangerous pride in the intellectual acumen she knows she possesses. Edward Casaubon, in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, is a fine example of the instability of the virtue of intellectual tenacity. His *magnum opus* was the writing of a *Key to All Mythologies*, in which he hoped to show that 'that all the mythical systems or erratic mythical fragments in the world were corruptions of a tradition originally revealed' (ch. 3). It is easy for us to shake our heads at the grandiosity of his ambitions, circumscribed as they are at the same time by the narrowness of his religion: the 'tradition originally revealed' is that of the Book of Genesis. Yet, his project bears strong similarities to James Frazer's great work, *A Study in Comparative Religion* (retitled in its second edition *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*), which was finally published in all its 12 volumes in 1915. It was a work with wide influence, impressing among others T. S. Eliot and Wittgenstein. Nevertheless—the instability reasserts itself—Casaubon comes across to most readers of the novel as a dry, dull pedant, in sharp contrast with the vivacious, clear-headed Dorothea who becomes his wife.

It is worth noting that although an old-fashioned conception of truth now seems to be more in need of defending than ever, there are even vices at both extremes. Montmarquet (1993, p. 22) observes that the desire for truth is entirely compatible with intellectual dogmatism or fanaticism. Such desire may involve impatience with those areas of enquiry that lead less to truth, conceived in a scientific (or pseudo-scientific) way, than to interpretations that are more or less adequate or persuasive. There is no 'truth' in an insightful reading of a novel, or an impressive new interpretation of the causes of the First World War, that is comparable to the truths of mathematics or physics. But this does not mean that the good historian or literary critic does not respect and desire truth, nor that she does so too little. The criteria of good work in her field are simply different. Aristotle has an important insight into this which virtue epistemologists might take to heart. He reminds us that rigour, or 'precision' as his translator below has it, is relative to the issue under consideration:

It is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs. (Aristotle, 1969, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094b11–27)

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have been critical of attempts to base programmes of character education on the virtues, moral or epistemic. However, it is my view that character education in schools and other places of education is desirable and indeed inevitable, but not as a programme: not as 'an intentional and planned approach to character development' (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue, quoted by Jerome & Kisby (2019, p. 19)). It is inevitable that children will learn from their teachers something of what it is like to be a grown-up human being, for better or worse: someone they might aspire to be, or hope to avoid being. They might become patient and kindly adults, with a sense of proportion—or the opposite. They, too, might come to value education as the teacher does and pass this on in turn. (Of the virtue at the mean here too there is, I think, no name.) None of this, though, entails that teachers should *model* virtue for their pupils as a matter of deliberate example. As Davis (2003, p. 45) writes, 'If modeling means anything, it must mean acting better (or at least differently) than one would otherwise because being seen so to act is part of improving the character of students'. To do this is to be

a hypocrite, Davis concludes (p. 46) and to teach hypocrisy. Fortunately, children tend to see through it readily enough.

The respect in which character education is desirable in schools has been sketched or implied in many places above, particularly in the third section. The exploration of the virtues and vices helps children make sense of a complicated world, whether this is through discussion of the everyday drama of the classroom or of books (and plays, and films) being studied. These have a special place, because, as Iris Murdoch reminds us, the study of literature and language is 'an education in how to picture and understand human situations' (1970, p. 34); those situations inevitably lead to consideration of the qualities of the people involved in them. Character education of this kind is not vulnerable to the criticisms of the programmatic sort I made in the second section. As it is exploratory, it is not indoctrinatory. It is not arbitrary or faddish in the virtues (and vices) addressed, since the books (and other art works such as films) studied have emerged as worth reading on the basis that they are reliable guides to life's central and important questions. We do not imagine that it is possible to assess the effects of such books on children's character, even if we hope—perhaps have faith—that they will be affected deeply by them. Literature of this kind tends to examine the character virtues in their social, economic and political context and not apart from it, the more so as students move up the school.⁷ The instability of the virtues is not an obstacle to character education of this kind. It is what makes it possible and absorbingly interesting.

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ENDNOTES

¹ England is a separate jurisdiction in the UK, the others being Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. To include here character education in these latter jurisdictions is not possible within the scope of this paper. The same is true for other countries, particularly the United States.

² I do not discuss the work of the Jubilee Centre at any length in this paper since it is a unique case and, in basing its programme on Aristotle, it is not vulnerable to many of the criticisms of character education that follow. I do, however, offer some brief criticisms in places here, which I hope to develop in further work.

³ All references to Aristotle are to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in the translation by Ross (Aristotle, 1969) except where indicated otherwise. Neither Aristotle nor Ross is gender neutral. Aristotle is writing in a culture that is interested in the virtues of free men, exclusively, of a particular caste. This should trouble rather more than it does those who today base theories of character education on Aristotle.

⁴ This ideal used to be quite common. The motto of my own London grammar school was 'Rather use than fame'.

⁵ The adjective *kalos* cannot be translated by any single English word. It can mean, for instance, 'beautiful', 'fine' and 'excellent' depending on the context. It is gendered, and it would be strange to find it used of an impoverished individual or a slave.

⁶ The idea is tellingly captured by a journalist who, writing of a well-known British politician, observed that 'A man who is arrogant about his modesty is a terrible thing' (Orr, 2016).

⁷ See for example the list at https://www.fortismere.haringey.sch.uk/_site/data/files/sixth%20form/bridging%20activities/CD419E4294377A6AEFCB0021614A4CE8.pdf

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