
Character, Virtue and Ethics in Faith-Based Higher Education: *Who Should I Become?* A Short Précis of *A Christian Education in the Virtues: Character Formation and Human Flourishing* (Routledge, 2021)

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Brother Agathon wrote "The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher" in 1785, viewed as a work of some significance in the Lasallian heritage. My modest contribution follows much of what Brother Agathon details in his work. Like Brother Agathon, I place character virtues at the center of the teacher's role. Simply put, a virtue is a good habit and a habit is an abiding quality in a person that inclines them to feel and act in certain ways. Therefore, a virtue is a habit that inclines one to act in a good manner, both externally and intentionally. By character we decide not just what we ought to do, but who we will be. Virtues can be both valuable in themselves as well as for the acts they produce, and the idea of the human good consists both in virtuous actions and in being a person of a certain character. The good for the individual and the good for the community are both necessary parts of the good of humankind – it humanizes society. As Brother Agathon would agree: teaching is essentially a calling by God to serve humanity.

Teachers make a difference beyond examination results so that their students can excel regardless of what life brings. Teaching cannot be reduced to the model of the skilled technician or simply to one whose contribution is the transmission of information and knowledge. By focusing on the mechanics of teaching it is possible to teach, but this would be an impoverished view of the teacher. Teaching presupposes that something of value is to be taught, and it is concerned with improving people. The teacher is also an "educator" – one who helps form human beings, because the time spent by students in the company of teachers is formative. Intentionally or not, teachers shape the character of their students, for at the heart of teaching is the relationship between teacher and student. Today, few would dispute that character is important for life chances and for relations with friends, family and wider society. So what is character? Definitions vary. Character is about who we are and who we can become. It is not a fixed set of easily measured traits incapable of modification. The formation of character has been a perennial aim of education. Yet it lends itself neither to a single fixed definition nor to superficial analysis. This is because character speaks of large human questions of purpose and meaning. It speaks of character virtues.

It is clear to me that beneath every educational activity lie distinct anthropological commitments, including the significance of the virtues for character formation. Indeed, anthropological neutrality does not exist since modern educational systems will have their own idea of what a human being essentially is as manifested in their sets of values, sense of purpose, codes of conduct and educational goals. This is the case whether or not their understanding of human nature is explicitly articulated or merely implicit. In contemporary educational circles, theory is influenced largely by positivism and secular norms that combine to exclude or marginalize theological elements. Indeed, many Christian institutions too easily mirror the educational philosophies and practices of secular institutions. However, an authentic Christian approach to character education is teleological; and its end-point is a relationship with God.

If we claim that education prepares human beings for life, then it follows that we need to have some conception of what the purpose of that life is. The main goal of education is, therefore,

to help human beings become more fully human. Teachers need to ask themselves what kind of person they are seeking to promote, for it is not sensible to pursue an educational aim without considering what its concrete realizations would involve. All teachers need to be conscious of the kind of formation they offer their students since we cannot escape the fact that all education is simply the practical expression of our philosophical convictions. Education, in the form provided in universities, is intentional, structured, and institutionalized with pre-determined learning objectives for teaching. Education is, of course, lifelong, and not completed in school or university. We need an anthropology that provides an account of human nature: an anthropology that provides us with knowledge and understanding of our origins, nature, and destiny. People are, deep down, alike in some fundamental ways. This basic truth is often overlooked in modern philosophies of education. Consequently, the account of the good life is not merely a disposition to action, but must lead to the pursuit of purpose: the goal and destiny of human life.

Any attempt to define character and personal values as simply enabling students to better understand and function in their immediate surroundings is insufficient. Many students increasingly view education and especially their own efforts and performance as instrumental to their future achievement and to what will happen in their future lives. Character and virtues are deeper than economic values. If virtues are considered to be good human qualities, then their acquisition ought to be a goal of education. Through character education we do not simply acquire social and economic skills but focus, ultimately, on what kind of person we want to become. Aristotle spent a lot of time thinking about character, asking what character “virtues” were and how they were connected. One of his enduring insights is that character is partly natural and partly the result of education. He emphasizes the importance of acting well, in addition to recognizing the right path. Acquiring virtues is, therefore, necessary to live a flourishing life. How we live a good life forms an intrinsic part of how we act in society; requiring, as it does, a commitment to foster the flourishing of all human beings in order that we can fulfill our potential. Living well demands the satisfaction of primary needs such as good nutrition and health, but this alone is not sufficient since there is a difference between having what it takes to live well and living well. A really successful life consists in virtue, that is, in the love of the good and the ability to do it. It requires us to be motivated to desire the good, an ability or capacity to do the good and a self-identification as a good person – in other words, a disposition to think, feel, and behave in a virtuous manner. A virtuous person is someone who is truly happy because they love and do what is good even in moments of pain and suffering. The virtuous person does the good because they love it, not simply because they are commanded to do it.

Aristotle would have said it is in our self-interest to desire the good life. In sum, he concludes that the virtues determine who we are and the kind of world we see. Virtues are constitutive of the good life, and the goal of education is about forming people so they can live well in a world worth living in. Character formation is not about following rules and commandments, because people are not components of a machine. Education, therefore, ought to teach us the skills to live well so we can answer the classic pair of questions: “Who am I?” and “How should I live?”

Character seen through a Christian lens envisions the Christian teacher as an educator who helps form human beings by improving them in knowledge and skills consonant with their true nature, ultimate end, and highest good. The teacher’s role is to bring about the synthesis between faith and experience, faith and culture, and faith and life. The teacher guides and encourages students toward eternal realities. Students see good character acted out and come to admire goodness in those significant in their lives – their teachers. The more the teacher

conforms to a Christian ideal of character, the more willing the student will be to accept this ideal. The Christian teacher cannot simply fulfill a functional role, but must believe and practice the Christian faith. This is why the teacher must speak the language of virtue and show that good character lives in their actions.

For Christian educators, human flourishing is inseparable from God's active relationship with human beings and this entails moral consequences for human life – ultimately through the moral progress of building Christ-like virtues. Christian character is the possession of those qualities, which essentially relate us to God. Character education, on this account, is about “waking up to life,” helping us grow and develop through a purposive, intentional, and life-long process. It grounds character and the virtues in relation to a person's creation in the image of God that accepts that we are each unique unities of body and soul, endowed with intellect, will, instinct, and emotion. Christians are called by God “to be conformed to the image of his Son” (*Romans* 8:29-30). A Christian approach to character virtues places emphasis on imitating Jesus Christ, who is the fullest expression of human nature and flourishing.

Christian education is a continuing voyage of learning and discovery that ultimately returns human beings to God. Christian teaching educates the mind to know the truth, and this in turn forms the entire person – because knowledge of the truth leads to living for what is good. The formation of the whole person recognizes the innate dignity of the student. It also recognizes that growth in character requires the need to be secure in faith and self-identity. Character formation promotes personal vocation and connectedness to Christian tradition, cultivates the heart, forges the will and shapes character in virtue. A person of character is someone who unifies and develops the powers of their soul through the help of grace. They seek to know the truth through the exercise of their intellect and memory, and choose the good and act according to it through the use of their intellect and will.

Christ provides a “goal,” an “example” of human flourishing and character: this goal is union with God and one's neighbor through charity. The language of Christ is clear: “be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect”; “Love one another as I have loved you”; “I have come that you might have life, and life more abundantly.” The early Church followed Christ's example and developed ways that individuals and communities might flourish: by teaching about human dignity (thereby affirming life in all its stages), serving the poor, witnessing to conscience, etc. This activity was an example of grace perfecting nature. Ultimately, by placing God in the center of human flourishing, Christ (and subsequent Christian culture) ended by more powerfully encouraging human flourishing – seemingly a paradoxical result, but in fact appropriate, if God is indeed the highest good and the source of all flourishing, natural and supernatural. The Christian transformation of character – how shall we live (by faith, hope, and love and by the practice of the virtues) – provides the catechesis for Christian character education. The “thick” content of this catechesis begins with virtue habituation into roles and responsibilities guided by Church teaching, examples and liturgy, under the right conditions: character taught and caught. With sufficient personal effort, this becomes increasingly self-directed, reflective and intelligent: character sought.

Formation is what happens to a person living in community, but it is not simply about students in college. Nor does it come to an end during life. The main elements of this Christian formation come from prayer and worship, listening to and reading Scripture and Christian doctrines, offering service to others, as well as teaching and learning. All of these elements inform, instruct, inculcate, and ultimately seek to form our entire being because the self we become is largely determined by the commitments we make. A Christian anthropology views humans as

material and immaterial, body and soul, not one or the other. This is why a Christian anthropology knows the limits of developmental theories arising from the social sciences, as those theories ignore the spiritual and theological dimensions of the person in Christian community. The Church has traditionally been understood as a school of virtue that helped shape character, not so much as through telling us what to do, as encouraging us to ask the question: “Who shall I become?” Formation, therefore, is not limited to the task of formal catechesis only, but is the formation of humankind into the image of Christ. Every aspect of the Church’s life is directed at formation, to create a formation that is a profound, comprehensive and dynamic immersion of the person in the traditions of the Church.

I suggest that Catholic higher education should not simply be about acquiring academic, economic and social skills, for it is ultimately about the kind of person a student becomes. This is because humans have a purpose beyond being an instrument or tool in social processes, which is not achieved in a vacuum. In order to become a person, an individual needs to grow and flourish within a culture. The richer that culture, the more of a person they have a chance of becoming. Families, the Church and schools and universities have a central purpose to educate, and the aim of education is to develop each individual as fully as possible: to make them more human. Above all, it is important to realize that this virtue approach to character construction has much more to do with the trajectory of life: who we are now and who we are becoming.

You can access the full text of the book below:

<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/oa-mono/10.4324/9781003141877/christian-education-virtues-james-arthur?context=ubx&refId=fcb55f32-85bf-4c11-ab5d-6e6ffd293cc4>

Endnotes

1. Professor James Arthur, the short précis of whose book is presented here, is the Director of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues in the School of Education at the University of Birmingham (United Kingdom). He has written widely on the relationship between theory and practice in education, particularly the links between character, virtues, citizenship, religion, and education. He earned his D. Phil. at Oxford University.