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## Countering Teleopathy in Catholic Universities: Toward a Theologically Modified Character and Virtue Education Framework

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### Introduction: The Problem of Teleopathy and the Need to Rediscover the Purpose of Catholic Higher Education

Numerous authors over the past several decades have observed that Western universities, both private and public, are undergoing serious decline and even crisis because they have abandoned something essential to their identity and mission (e.g., Dawson 1989; Buckley 1998; Burtchaell 1998; MacIntyre 2001; Sommerville 2006; Lewis 2007; Staudt 2019). Catholic universities have been no exception to this trend (Staudt 2019). In one way or another, these critiques all boil down to the fact that universities have either stopped educating the whole person and reduced education to something much more limited, such as technical professional training, social justice activism, or narrowly specialized knowledge of a discipline, or they have committed themselves to vague "morality or a general social ethic" (Briel, et al., pp. 73-74 citing Buckley 1998, p. 14). Recently Briel et al. have offered a diagnosis, calling this phenomenon of mission drift: "teleopathy." "Teleopathy" refers to a "disease of ends" and occurs when "*limited goals take on ultimate importance*" for an organization (Briel et al., pp. 10, 74).

Teleopathy typically follows a three-stage pattern in Catholic university settings: (Briel et al., pp. 75-87): first, university leaders (especially trustees, administrators, faculty) fixate in their decisions and activities on limited goals ("fixation"), then they seek to justify such fixation on the basis of things like market needs or ideological pressures ("rationalization"), and finally they drift or detach from their primary convictions ("detachment").

Such universities no longer are able to give a thick account of their distinctive mission, and thus can neither prioritize according to that mission nor institutionalize it effectively. What Catholic universities need is a fuller account of the *telos* as well as practical strategies of pursuing this *telos* so they can be more *teleocentric* and less *teleopathic*. According to *A Framework for Character Education in Schools* (Jubilee Centre 2017, p. 9), "Each school needs to describe the kinds of persons it wants to help develop and then outline the philosophy that underlines its approach in the development of its students." Thus, the question arises: Where might floundering Catholic universities turn as they attempt to develop a vision of the human person and outline a philosophy to guide their educational approach, one not only in harmony with but deeply rooted in their distinctly Catholic character?

In their own response to teleopathy, Briel et al. advance a rich account of the mission of Catholic university education and even make many helpful concrete recommendations about how to "institutionalize" this mission across the university. At the heart of their account, they insist that to be faithful to its Catholic mission, a university must rediscover and remain firmly rooted in the Catholic intellectual tradition. On the basis of this tradition, they argue that the overarching

purpose or core mission of Catholic universities is to foster “integral human development” of students (or to “educate the whole person”) “through an interdisciplinary approach to education with its deepest roots expressed philosophically and theologically” (2021, p. 3).

While I generally and heartily agree with Briel et al.’s proposals and recommendations, what seems missing is an actionable outline of such an educational approach, one that would be rooted in, and flow from, the Catholic educational tradition. While they identify many traits of the well educated Catholic university student in the course of the book, what seems needed is something like a framework that contains both an account of the human person and human flourishing and an outline of the various traits that a university would strive to develop in its students that corresponds to this account. To supply such a need, the Jubilee Centre’s university character education *framework* was created precisely “to help universities articulate and structure their mission to further the flourishing of their students and the holistic character development that is central to it” (2020, p. 1); it offers universities “a philosophically rigorous and practically actionable conceptual framework” for educating for individual and social flourishing (2020, p. 2). Thus, the university framework purports to offer a powerful resource to help all universities, including Catholic universities, understand and direct their practical efforts to carry out their mission, thereby countering the disease of teleopathy.

Therefore, building on and complementing the work of Briel et al., I will argue that Catholic universities might rediscover their core mission to educate the whole person with greater clarity and be better equipped to carry out that mission by adopting the framework of the Jubilee Centre. But the Jubilee Centre’s framework for universities cannot and should not be taken “as is” but would need to be significantly modified if it is to fulfill its stated intention for *Catholic* universities. Thus by theologically augmenting the Jubilee Centre’s framework in ways reflecting their distinctive mission and educational tradition, Catholic universities might equip themselves with a potent “philosophically rigorous and practically actionable conceptual framework” (Jubilee Centre 2020, p. 2) with which to remedy their teleopathy.

I will proceed with my argument in the following steps. First, I will address a fairly weighty objection one might have to a Catholic university using a secular educational framework such as that of the Jubilee Centre. Second, I will consider the claim that the primary purpose of Catholic university education is intellectual, not moral and relate this claim to the “two core principles” that should illuminate the university’s principally intellectual *telos*. Third, if the primary *telos* is intellectual as claimed, and “wisdom” is the most distinctive virtue of university education, I will argue that contemplative wisdom (*sophia*) should be given a (more) distinct and prominent place in a virtue education framework that would be geared toward universities. Fourth, I will briefly illustrate how a theologically informed Christian anthropology would modify an Aristotelian account of flourishing and would require the addition of supernatural virtues to a virtue education framework. And to conclude, I will make some brief observations and illustrate some practical applications of the framework to different facets of the university.

## **A Preliminary Objection: “Why Use a Secular ‘Blueprint’ for a Sectarian University?”**

One rather serious objection might be launched at this point, making my argument a non-starter. The Jubilee Centre’s Framework is a secular framework, drawing from several profane (non-theological) disciplines and is intended for broad use across ideological lines; moreover, it draws heavily upon an ancient pagan Greek philosophy of human flourishing, character, and the virtues, especially Aristotle’s ethics. Why would a Catholic university wish to use a secular educational framework? How could such a framework help Catholic universities articulate and commit more fully to their *distinctive* mission as “Catholic”? After all, much of the criticism of Catholic universities is that they have adopted a secular and impoverished model of education.

In reply to this important objection, I would first counter that I am not proposing that the Jubilee Centre’s Framework be adopted and applied as a secular blueprint of a character and virtue-focused university education. Nor does the Jubilee Centre prescribe or intend it to be used as a blueprint at all; in fact, just the opposite. The framework is to serve as a “guide” for schools to reflect on a set of concepts and practical considerations as they work to envision and implement character education, as unique institutions in their unique circumstances. Thus, no school – secular or religious – should use the framework as an “off-the-shelf blueprint” (2020, p. 8).

In addition, and perhaps more to the central point of the objection, I would observe that “secular” is not necessarily understood pejoratively by Catholics, nor is Catholicism as “sectarian” as one might suppose. Indeed, Catholicism holds to the relative autonomy of the secular sphere and academic disciplines, and acknowledges the order of “secondary causality” where things of the world are given their being by God and act as true causes (though not in a fideistic sense). Even though a “fallen world,” the Church presupposes the inherent dignity, goodness and intelligibility of the created natural realm, including human beings, and thus presumes that many elements of goodness and truth exist in every human culture. Catholic theology holds that: *Gratia non tollit naturam, sed perficit*, “grace does not destroy but perfects nature” (Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologiae*, P. 1, Q. 1, art. 8 ad 2); sacred theology presupposes and builds on philosophy and other “secular” arts and sciences.

Indeed, Catholic intellectual tradition has always included a profound respect for and engagement with pre-Christian thought, especially Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, as key players of Western thought and culture. As John Paul II explains, a Catholic university “is open to all human experience and is ready to dialogue with and learn from any culture” but in this dialogue it must also “discern their positive and negative aspects” (1990: para. 43, 44). Newman captures this Catholic attitude toward Aristotle: “In many subject-matters, to think correctly, is to think like Aristotle” (1891, p. 110). For these reasons and more, the Catholic university should not hesitate to look for some direction in the “best” of secular learning when it is wrestling with teleopathy and recommitting to its educational mission as a university.

But before I proceed to recommend particular modifications to the Jubilee Centre Framework, I must turn to Briel et al.’s “two core principles” of Catholic higher education, for these two principles are central to a concept of a Catholic university and should, therefore, guide any Catholic augmentation of the framework. Under the guidance of these two principles, it seems that the Jubilee Centre’s “neo-Aristotelian” account of human flourishing and corresponding character/

virtue education framework would need to become more of a Catholic “neo-Thomistic” account and framework to be suited for a Catholic university setting (though I will not be able to develop this modified account at much length in this paper).

### **The Two Core Principles and the Principally Intellectual Purpose of a Catholic University**

In Briel et al.’s account, the primary purpose of a Catholic university is intellectual, not moral. Assuming this claim is basically true, it raises a plausible objection to my argument: Would it lead to greater teleopathy to place a character and virtue framework at the center of mission (presuming it is a moral formation framework)? Before responding to this question, it will be important to consider more carefully what we define as the “principally intellectual endeavor” claimed by Briel et al. (p. 76) and what good it promises for human flourishing overall.

The mission of each type of institution is defined principally by the distinct “good” which it hopes to contribute to human beings. What, then, is this distinct “good” of a university? In general terms, I agree with Kristjánsson’s (2020) claim that “human flourishing is the aim of education.” But this could be said of all human institutions and actions in general (athletic programs, health care institutions, etc.), and this is why “human flourishing” (*eudaimonia*) is held in eudaimonic accounts of flourishing like Aristotle’s as a “final” or “ultimate” end, i.e., a *telos* for the sake of which we do all that we do.

So then, we must ask, what is the distinct “good” at which a university institution aims? As an institution of “higher learning,” I would suggest that the answer has to do with the nature of that learning: the goodness of truth or “universal knowledge.” In his Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (1990), John Paul II teaches that the essential aim or “basic mission” of universities is not merely “human flourishing” but is human flourishing in and through the impartial search for truth: “a continuous quest for truth through its research, and the preservation and communication of knowledge for the good of society” (John Paul II 1990, para. 30; see also para. 5 and para. 7).

How does a university being “Catholic” impact this *telos*? While it might be supposed that a faith-based institution might limit the range of truth, John Paul II claims that, instead, “by its Catholic character, a University is made more capable of conducting an impartial search for truth” (1990, para. 7), not less. John Paul II describes the scope of this search for truth as all-encompassing: “Without in any way neglecting the acquisition of useful knowledge [e.g., technical professional training], a Catholic University is distinguished by its free search for the whole truth about nature, man and God” (1990, para. 4).

In other words, at least in theory, the good of truth on offer at a Catholic university should include the knowledge of every art, science, field, or discipline and thus be “interdisciplinary” and “integrative.” This is what John Henry Newman (1891) meant a century earlier when he claimed that the “universal knowledge” in liberal learning is the object of university studies and why he argued for a place for every discipline within the “circle of knowledge,” including revealed theology. It is this unity and extension of truth across spheres and fields of knowledge that is the basis of the two core principles of Catholic higher education: the unity of knowledge with the continual task of integrating knowledge (John Paul II 1990, para. 15-16, 20), and the

complementarity of faith and reason ever rediscovered by means of the ongoing dialogue between faith and reason (John Paul II 1990, para. 15, 17, 20). Any account of the purpose of the Catholic university would need to be rooted in these two fundamental convictions; and thus any attempt to counter teleopathy would also need to be grounded in and harmonize with these principles.

### **The Primacy of the Virtue(s) of Wisdom?**

In *The Idea of a University* Newman defends the intrinsic value of university education based on the unique “perfection” or excellence of the mind it was supposed to yield; this excellence is what he calls the “philosophic habit of mind.” This habit is a virtuous disposition that enables “the power of viewing many things at once as one whole, of referring them severally to their true place in the universal system, of understanding their respective values, and determining their mutual dependence” (Newman 1891, p. 137). Here we see the connection between the two core principles and an intellectual virtue: “The two guiding principles of Catholic higher education, the unity of knowledge and the complementarity of faith and reason, result in the acquisition of *wisdom*” (Briel et al., p. 43). This wisdom thus stems from sources both human and divine, natural and revealed. Wisdom, fed by the integration of disciplinary knowledge derived from resources of both faith and reason, is the culminating and integrative virtue distinctive to a university education. One might say that *sophia* (philosophical wisdom) is the “meta-virtue” of university education, along with *phronesis* (practical wisdom). This contemplative wisdom is the “fruit” of the impartial search for truth at a Catholic university; it is this wisdom, above all, that most represents the university’s distinctive “good” contributing to individual and social flourishing. Sacred Scripture beautifully captures the supremacy of “wisdom”:

Therefore I prayed, and prudence was given me:  
I pleaded and the spirit of Wisdom came to me.  
I preferred her to scepter and throne,  
and deemed riches nothing in comparison with her,  
nor did I liken any priceless gem to her;  
because all gold, in view of her, is a bit of sand,  
and before her, silver is to be accounted mire.  
Beyond health and beauty I loved her,  
and I chose to have her rather than the light,  
because her radiance never ceases.  
Yet all good things together came to me with her,  
and countless riches at her hands;  
I rejoiced in them all, because Wisdom is their leader,  
though I had not known that she is their mother. (*Wisdom* 7:7-12)

The possession and contemplation of the truth with this virtue leads to an overflow of spiritual pleasure: *gaudium in veritate*, “joy in the truth” (John Paul II 1990, para. 1).

Now I am in a position to return to the objection raised in the last section: If the primary purpose of a university education were intellectual, not moral, would this not suggest that a character framework would cause rather than cure teleopathy by putting “second things first”? Not necessarily. The reason is due to the fact that “secondary” does not mean unimportant or marginal

to mission but that moral formation is ordered “to cultivate habits of mind to see things in relation to each other and to make good judgments about the world” (Briel et al., p. 76). It is critical at this juncture to reply to this objection by pointing out the fact that the Jubilee Centre’s Framework for universities includes intellectual virtues as well as moral virtues (and amoral ones like the performance virtues) and that this framework is not exclusively, but inclusively, moral. While the emphasis of the framework does seem to be moral and virtue-ethics heavy, it is perhaps even more importantly a holistic, or integrative, framework for education. It places the many different kinds of virtues within an integral whole and orders them all toward individual and social flourishing under the guidance and conducting of *phronesis*. This is an important observation lest the holistic nature of the framework be overlooked.

One way of capturing all this is to say that the aim of a Catholic university education is to help form and foster in students an integrated set of virtues (intellectual, moral, civic, performance as well as theological and infused virtues) corresponding to an integrated set of goods that, when chosen together, are constitutive of human flourishing, individually and socially. According to *A Framework for Character Education in Schools* (Jubilee Centre 2017, p. 9), “Each school needs to describe the kinds of persons it wants to help develop and then outline the philosophy that underlines its approach in the development of its students.” This is true for universities, as well, and such a description or outline would have to include the virtue of wisdom. Thus, I recommend that the intellectual virtue of contemplative wisdom (*sophia*) should have a definite and prominent place in a modified character and virtue framework for use in Catholic universities.

### **Theologically Modifying a Neo-Aristotelian Framework for Application in Catholic Universities**

Above I argued that the Jubilee Centre’s Framework for character education could help Catholic universities clarify and recommit to their mission, thereby countering their “teleopathic” tendencies. But there is one important condition to this proposal, namely, that such a framework must first be augmented by Catholic theology. In fact, the framework must not be taken “as is” but should be augmented in two ways: “naturalistically,” somewhat along the lines of Kristján Kristjánsson’s (2020) contemporary “expanded account of Aristotelian flourishing” (“EAF”), and “super-naturalistically,” along the theological lines of James Arthur’s recent work *A Christian Education in the Virtues: Character Formation and Human Flourishing* (2021). For the purposes of my present argument, I will focus on the latter, not the former modification.

Since the Jubilee Centre’s character education frameworks are grounded in a “neo-Aristotelian” account of human flourishing, character education, and the virtues, it seems natural to look to the Catholic intellectual tradition to see how Aristotle’s ethical theory – especially his *Nicomachean Ethics* (2009) – has been appropriated theologically. The great assimilator of Aristotle is Saint Thomas Aquinas (AD 1225-1274). Rather than a neo-Aristotelian theory and framework, Catholic universities would be equipped with a “Neo-Aristotelian-Thomistic” theory and framework (Arthur 2021).

Aristotle’s virtue-centric concept of flourishing is encapsulated in the Greek word, *eudaimonia*, translated “human flourishing” or “happiness.” According to Aristotle’s human-function (*ergon*) argument (2009, p. 11-12 [1097b-1098a], *eudaimonia* is the ultimate end and highest good of

human life and this flourishing is found above all in excellent, i.e., rational and virtuous, human activity (Kristjánsson 2020); a life of mere pleasure or sub-rational behavior could not fulfill human potential and, therefore, undermines human fulfillment. The notion of excellent, “reason-infused activity, suitable and peculiar to human beings, achieved over a complete life” (Kristjánsson 2020, p. 9) is thus the centerpiece in Aristotle’s account of human teleology and in any *eudaimonic* educational theory. Since the acquisition and exercise of the virtues is what leads to good character, developing good character is paramount to a *eudaimonic* account and character education needs to focus on virtue formation and growth above all.

Aristotle’s moral naturalism could not be used as a “thick” enough backdrop for a character and virtue framework for Catholic universities that wish to retrieve and recommit to their distinctive mission as a *Catholic* university. Hence, his account needs to be stretched or expanded in a few ways. This expansion would need to follow the lines of a Christian anthropology, which relates the origin, nature, “function,” and end or destiny of human beings to God. The classical Thomistic axiom, “grace presupposes and builds on nature” would guide this “supernaturalistic” expansion of Aristotelian flourishing and virtue ethics.

For instance, Christian faith holds that human beings are made by God in the image of God (*imago Dei*) in a determinate human nature that is nevertheless destined to be “divinized” by the gratuitous gift of grace. While Aristotle sometimes describes human capacities in terms of becoming “godlike” (e.g., his treatment of contemplation in Book 10 as a godlike activity), this is not the same as Christians would understand “divinization” by the work of the Holy Spirit in the human soul. On the one hand, Aristotle would readily agree that human beings are bodily, rational, volitional, relational, and substantially one (e.g., through hylomorphism), but he would not have known three other tenets of a Catholic anthropology: (1) created in God’s image, (2) sin’s effects of dimming our intellect and weakening our will, and (3) called to be joined to the communion with Christ in the Church through the sacrament of Baptism (Arthur 2021, p. 42). As the Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* puts it: “only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear” (Flannery 1996, para. 22).

The twofold capacity for action – nature and grace – corresponds to the Christian view of the human *telos* being twofold: human beings are not merely called to an earthly, temporal, and natural human life that at best only leads to incomplete beatitude but they are also called to a heavenly, eternal, and supernatural life where alone happiness is complete. Saint Thomas Aquinas formulates this twofold end: “Now man’s happiness is twofold. One is proportionate to human nature, a happiness, to wit, which man can obtain by means of his natural principles. The other is a happiness surpassing man’s nature, and which man can obtain by the power of God alone” (ST I-II, q. 62, a.1). Divinization by grace is made possible by the coming of Jesus Christ and the gift of grace that comes from and through him in the Christian sacraments. This transformative process starts in this life but is only fulfilled in the complete happiness of the beatific vision in the next life. An account of human flourishing and a corresponding education framework would need a place for both types of *eudaimonia*. Or as Arthur (2021, p. 25) puts it: “Today we would say that the student is [being] prepared for life here and hereafter, and this could be said to be the Christian teleology of education.”

The introduction of a supernatural principle of divine life into human nature by an undeserved gift of God's love gives human beings a twofold capacity for virtuous activity, natural and supernatural, corresponding to their twofold *telos*. Whereas Aristotle's natural moral and intellectual virtues are all "acquired" virtues, for Saint Thomas human beings are called and enabled to perfect the divine image within themselves with the additional assistance of grace-infused virtues, theological virtues, and gifts of the Holy Spirit (Cessario 2009; Pinckaers 2001). Even if there are analogues for Christian virtues among acquired virtues of those not in the state of grace, Thomas' inclusion of these supernatural virtues and gifts would require a neo-Aristotelian framework to be stretched quite a lot so as to allot them an appropriately elevated place. The three theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity would need to be understood as supernatural meta-virtues, superior to but influencing positively the meta-virtue of *phronesis*.<sup>2</sup>

## Conclusion

My goal throughout this essay has been to invite educational leaders at Catholic universities (especially trustees, administrators, faculty) to consider whether and how the Jubilee Centre's university-level character and virtues framework might help them counter the teleopathy of their institutions and empower them for their leadership roles. I have argued that the Jubilee Centre's Framework, duly modified by the Catholic intellectual and theological tradition, might serve Catholic university leaders as a "philosophically rigorous and practically actionable conceptual framework" (Jubilee Centre 2020) as they seek to fight teleopathy in their institutions. The practical implications are enormous, and touch on nearly every aspect of the university. Therefore, perhaps it might be useful to conclude with some particular reflections and questions to illustrate how it might be "practically actionable." I give three or four areas of application: academic leaders, leaders of admission and marketing, and leaders of athletic programs.

1. *Academic leaders*: Because it's an education framework, the possible applications are many. But certainly academic leaders – from provost to program directors – might encourage faculty development as well as curricula development, review, or revision efforts across the disciplines using a common framework so that particular virtues, strengths, or skills are appropriately foregrounded yet explicitly situated within the overall virtues framework and remain subordinated to "wisdom" (practical and theoretical) as a meta-virtue. Programs, courses, and syllabi could identify key virtues in the student learning outcomes and provide a brief rationale connecting them to wisdom, character, and an overall flourishing life. For instance, one question that could guide such professional development or curricular work, "What truth is being pursued in this or that course, and how does such disciplinary truth relate to: (a) knowledge in other disciplines within the circle of knowledge, including philosophy and Catholic theology, and (b) the overall good of human flourishing?" How might such curricula be (re)situated and related to the Catholic intellectual tradition and spiritual or supernatural dimensions of the (modified) framework? Does upper administration seem to care about whether the individual faculty or departments are flourishing? Do they exhibit the character traits they would want their faculty to model to students?
2. *Admissions and Marketing/ Communications Leadership*: A framework contains an outline of the key elements of the overall education the university aims to offer. It should influence

what story is told by both marketing and admissions departments. The main question they will need to answer in a clear, compelling, and concise way is: “Is your university’s education worth it?” A robust framework like a modified Jubilee Centre framework supplies a rich resource for articulating the value proposition of Catholic university education today. Admissions and marketing might be glad to have such a framework for their work. How might the framework better equip admissions personnel in “selling” the university to prospective students, answering their objections, and accompanying them with care through the admissions process? For example, does the framework help them better answer a question like, “Why go here when I can get job training over there?” or “Why do I have to take a theology course requirement?” Do staff feel confident that they can respond effectively to objections or concerns about the “Catholic” elements and convincingly articulate how these elements would not detract from, but rather add to, their educational experience in light of the framework?

3. *Athletics Program Leaders*: Most coaches, like most teachers, would readily admit they aim at developing attributes in their student athletes that go beyond the technical skills of playing the game. Some will even now talk about their goal of “developing the whole person” and preparing them for life – not just for the field or court. Even small doses of sports psychology can go a long way to promote “winning in life, not just in sport.” Do coaches use “character development” language explicitly when they speak about their program? Do they go beyond merely the “performance strengths” of psychology and incorporate moral virtues like moderation, courage, honesty, and compassion? Do they mentor their assistant coaches and staff to think and speak this way with each other and with the players? Do they themselves strive to model it? How would a framework like this potentially help them share and explain their philosophy of coaching, and even particular coaching techniques, more fully and effectively? How would prospective students and their families respond to such a way of describing the student athlete experience?

Much more might be said about a modified Jubilee Centre Framework and how it could practically guide university leaders as they guide their institutions and fight against teleopathy. (The epilogue of Briel, Goodpastor and Briel is a short but powerful “examination of conscience” for university leaders (2021, p. 139-143)). But one thing is clear about our university leaders themselves: “We need leaders of vision and virtue especially the virtues of wisdom and courage to guide us forward” (Briel et al. p. 130). Without such virtues in Catholic university leaders themselves, Catholic universities will increasingly succumb to the disease of teleopathy and die; but with such virtues and the grace of God, there is no limit to healing and resurrection.

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## **Endnotes**

1. Matthew Gerlach, who earned his doctorate in religious studies at Marquette University, serves as the vice president for character, virtue, and ethics and core professor of ethics and leadership at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota.
2. This is sometimes translated as the exercise of prudence.