The Theory and Practice of Virtue Education

*The Theory and Practice of Virtue Education* offers the reader a comprehensive and authoritative account of both the theoretical and practical complexities of cultivating virtue in education and beyond. The book moves beyond the usual philosophical literature that merely discusses virtue in the abstract and offers scholarly, research-informed suggestions for practice.

Drawn from a highly successful international conference organised by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, the chapters in this volume offer a unique insight into the varieties of approaches that leading scholars have identified for putting the learning and nurturing of virtues into practice. Featured are chapters from internationally acclaimed scholars primarily in the fields of philosophy, psychology and education, which are categorised under three headings: philosophical and theoretical foundations for cultivating virtues; developing virtues in practice; and nurturing specific virtues. Beginning with chapters that examine differing theoretical complexities of virtue education, the book then moves on to explore different approaches to nurturing virtue in the classroom and beyond. This practical approach is further evidenced in the final section, where individual virtues are discussed.

*The Theory and Practice of Virtue Education* highlights the theoretical complexity of putting virtue education into practice and as a result, is of real use to researchers, academics and postgraduates in the fields of education, philosophy, psychology, sociology and theology. It should also be essential reading for educators in character and virtue.

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The Theory and Practice of Virtue Education

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The co-editors would like to express their sincere gratitude to Professor James Arthur, Professor Kristján Kristjánsson, Professor Robert C. Roberts and Professor David Carr for their support, advice and assistance during the editing process.
The collection of chapters in this volume has its origin in a highly successful international conference, organised by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, entitled ‘Cultivating Virtue’. The conference, where over 60 papers were presented, was held at Oriel College, Oxford, in January 2016. This collection includes many of the standout papers presented at the conference, along with some work specially commissioned.

The central aim of the volume is to highlight the theoretical complexity of putting virtue education into practice. It does so by adopting a multi-disciplinary lens and includes 16 chapters from internationally acclaimed scholars in the fields of philosophy, psychology and education. The book is arranged under three broad sections: i) philosophical and theoretical foundations for cultivating virtues; ii) theoretical and practical approaches for educating the virtues; and, iii) educating specific virtues. In sum, the story begins with theory, moves into broader practice and ends with examples of how specific virtues, including gratitude and compassion, might be cultivated. The book moves beyond philosophical literature discussing virtue in the abstract and offers research-informed suggestions about the implementation of virtue education.

An explicit and intended purpose of the book is an attempt to recover useful insights from reconstructed accounts of venerable philosophical traditions, including notably Aristotelian, Thomistic, Socratic, Platonic and Stoic. Some of the greatest thinking about virtues and virtue education are found here, and the authors writing about these traditions make a convincing case for the continued relevance of these traditions for modern educational purposes. In combination, the chapters demonstrate that virtue cultivation is not an extraneous addition to an understanding of morality or the study of moral philosophy; it is, rather, what such understanding and study are all about. We progress towards moral excellence only if we are educated from an early age – indeed from birth – to do so. Aristotle believed the purpose of moral inquiry ‘is not to know what virtue is, but to become good, since otherwise the inquiry would be of no benefit to us’ (NE, 1103b27–29).
Inspired by this call, the authors in the book bring new insights and perspectives to bear on the prospects and impediments for effective virtue education, and in so doing address the ordinary, practical and contextual aspects of virtue development. Recent volumes of collected works on the development of virtue or character education such as this one have taken a number of different approaches, for example tracing links between morality and citizenship, exploring cognitive psychological aspects of virtue acquisition or tracing a particular philosophy into practices of educating for character. Sometimes these volumes are principally academic and philosophical/psychological, whereas other times they are focused exclusively on teaching or pedagogical features. The present volume adds to this body of work by uniquely combining cutting-edge multidisciplinary theoretical arguments with outstanding practices of virtue education. Sometimes this is achieved by combining theory and practice in the same chapter, and sometimes this is accomplished across different chapters. Whilst there are more examples on which to draw than we can retrace here, we shall take a moment to highlight some important contributions in the theory and practice of virtue education from this volume.

One area where a number of advances are made in this volume concerns the cultivation and improvement of virtue in adults. For example, by applying philosophical argument and dual-process-theory in psychology, Nancy Snow identifies, as amenable to empirical testing, important pathways by which ordinary people may achieve full Aristotelian virtue. Snow asks if and how ordinary people can become fully virtuous even when not consciously focused on becoming so. Another means for improving adult virtue is suggested by Howard Curzer, who uses an intriguing medical model to liken the acquisition of virtue to the development of complex skills, and to consider the many ‘messy’ moral relapses (and advances) common to ordinary people for which appropriate ‘treatments’ are prescribed. Moral inertia of the weak-willed is the focus for Paulien Snellen, who argues that such individuals may remain in that state if the pain of intermittent failure is only fleeting or if societal contexts dull knowledge of better ways. Mark Jonas also advances knowledge of adult virtue cultivation, especially for those raised in poor ways, but his work is highlighted here for combining philosophical theory with tangible practical guidance. Jonas elaborates upon Plato’s insistence that true knowledge, as achievable only through dialogue, is necessary for adult (epiphanic) transformations. But poor adult habits elide this method – a philosophical realisation that leads Jonas to advocate a practical combination of dialogue with role-modelling for the cultivation of virtue in adults. The concluding chapter by Candice Vogler demonstrates how the virtue of compassion is built in to classrooms by the multitude of, often under-noticed, interactions that take place between teachers and students. This important chapter reminds us that theory is important to inspire, inform and guide virtue education, but it is the everyday human interactions that are at the heart of individual and societal flourishing.
An overview of the book

With a rich history, the field of virtue education is as diverse as it is complex. As a result, this book does not aim or profess to comprehensively cover the field of study. Instead, in the three parts outlined below, accounts of virtue education are provided that, taken together, offer an overview of what a historical and contemporary position on the education of virtue might consist of.

Part I: philosophical and theoretical foundations for educating the virtues

A traditional approach to cultivating virtue is first set out by David Carr as an introduction to the section and to the book as a whole. In this chapter, Carr describes how virtue is developed from the perspectives of Plato and Aristotle, paving the way for alternative philosophical approaches for cultivating virtue in the form of John Hacker-Wright’s Thomistic account of moral growth and Christopher Gill’s application of Stoicism in Chapters 2 and 3 respectively. In the next two chapters of this section, individual character flaws are considered from extremely novel perspectives. In Chapter 3, Howard Curzer proposes a medical model for the diagnosis, rehabilitation and prevention of character flaws, whereas Paulien Snellen proposes, in Chapter 5, that akrasia – or weakness of will – may often be a fixed state rather than a stage in transition to improvement. To complete the section, Nancy Snow in Chapter 6 sketches an intriguing account of how full-blown Aristotelian virtue may be within reach of ‘ordinary’ people who are not specifically or directly concerned with becoming virtuous. In its entirety, this part attempts to unravel some of the complexities of the field and aims to provide the reader with a sound footing, paving the way for subsequent chapters that provide a more direct and practical emphasis on ‘Putting Virtues into Practice’.

Part II: theoretical and practical approaches for educating the virtues

This part brings a number of perspectives to the development of virtues in practice. Mark Jonas opens the section with an examination of Plato’s theory of moral education and of Platonic dialogue as a promising method for the cultivation of virtues in poorly raised adults. The tables are turned a little in the next chapter by Elizabeth Campbell, who explores what might be working in the opposite direction – against the cultivation of virtue. She does this with a special emphasis on assumptions and doctrines that are potentially thwarting the education of virtue in teacher education. Next, Gillian Rosenberg highlights the role of teachers as moral agents, arguing that teachers have important and wide-ranging roles as character and moral educators, including a dual
responsibility to teach morally and to teach morality. A more general, but still a very much practical emphasis is taken up by the three remaining authors in this section. Bruce Maxwell considers empirical support for the claim that reading fiction favours the development of empathy as a trait of moral character to conclude that this link is more than a mere pedagogical legend. David McPherson, in Chapter 12, makes the case for manners as important for moral education. He offers arguments to parry common objections to manners as part of moral education. In the final chapter, Fay Niker adopts a policy lens to explore if government-endorsed ‘nudge’ policies can ever be the basis for cultivating virtue. This ‘could’ question is addressed from a position of neutrality about the ‘should’ question of whether or not such methods ought to be used for this purpose in liberal-democratic states. Overall, many intricacies involved in educating for virtue are explored in this section, which advocates a variety of approaches with regard to theory, normative understandings of virtue and ultimately what is practically possible.

Part III: educating specific virtues

A shift from general moral education to the cultivation of specific virtues takes place in this final part that illuminates and advances important debates about the cultivation of particular virtues. In the first chapter, a virtuous form of patriotism is proposed by Randall Curren and Charles Dorn, who use historic examples to demonstrate how this might form part of a responsible scheme of civic education. A different form of togetherness is pursued in Chapter 14 by Blaine Fowers and Austen Anderson who develop and promote Aristotelian notions of friendship as superior to alternative understandings and advocate friendship as fundamental for moral learning. Attention is turned next to the cultivation of gratitude by Terrance McConnell, who questions how far it really is possible to develop all aspects of this virtue through interventions. Finally, Candace Vogler closes the section with an emphasis on the practice and cultivation of courage in university classrooms. Vogler draws on Aquinas’s notion of virtue and action to offer pedagogic suggestions for making classrooms sites of virtue cultivation – a very practical note on which to end. All of the chapters in this section demonstrate how practical efforts towards cultivating virtue require at least a preliminary philosophical examination of the nature of a particular virtue, careful consideration of appropriate methods of intervention, experience and understanding about such cultivation and, last but not least, a recognition of the limits of this endeavour (as, for example, discussed by Terrance McConnell).
Part I

Philosophical and theoretical foundations for educating the virtues
From the general drift of Platonic dialogues, it would seem that Plato’s mentor Socrates deserves credit as the main architect of Western philosophy of a recognisably modern analytical form: indeed, many of the logical and dialectical techniques attributed to Socrates by Plato (such as reductio ad absurdum) are still the stock-in-trade of modern analytical philosophers. At all events, Greek thought prior to Socrates (significantly called ‘pre-Socratic’) seems to have been largely a matter of cosmological enquiry into the nature and origins of the experienced world – hence nearer to what would today be regarded as natural science rather than philosophy – or of the development of rhetorical argument for purposes of political persuasion. From this viewpoint, Socrates’ focus on the more fundamental task of clarifying the basic concepts and logical grammar of those discourses through which we seek to develop accounts of nature and/or society distinguishes his project fairly well from the activities of the cosmologists and the sophists.

Still, while this may seem to place Socrates’ enquiries at a level of some unhelpful abstraction from the activities of his more down-to-earth intellectual colleagues, hardly anything could be further from the truth (though modern-day ‘applied’ philosophers are still liable to much the same misconceived objection from their more purportedly ‘practical’ colleagues). To begin with, the fundamental point of Socratic departure is a profoundly practical – more precisely educational – question: that of how one should live one’s life (Plato, 1961a, 1961b) – and of how young and old might be helped by teaching or learning, to live good or flourishing lives. But second, Socrates’ approach to this question could hardly have greater direct impact on practical life. For if those who profess to have useful theories or accounts of how people should live are unclear about the basic terms of such accounts, then there can be little or no prospect of practical success for their projects. So, as Plato’s Socratic dialogues amply demonstrate, the grand speculations of the greatest intellectuals and theorists of Socrates’ day are repeatedly shown to be seriously confused about the meaning
of such key terms as knowledge, justice and virtue (as well as about such particular virtues as courage, wisdom and piety).

In relation to his fundamental concern with the question of virtue as good living, Socrates’ prime quarrel was with the sophists who, probably largely in line with popular Greek thought and usage, subscribed to a conception of *aretê* or virtue – the Greek term for ‘excellence’ – as *success*. In fact, the sophists seem to have been divided if not actually inconsistent on the question of what it is to live well as a socially positioned citizen. On the one hand, some of them seem to have held that virtue in the sense of moral probity was largely a matter of obedience to local social norms or conventions, with the consequent ‘relativist’ implication that what is morally right might vary from one social context or location to another. On the other hand, however, the more challenging of Socrates’ sophistical opponents seem to have embraced a more radical moral position – perhaps not too far from the views in modern times of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche – that any ethics of convention is fit only for slaves or the common herd, and that the ruthless pursuit of self-interest and self-advancement of the strong over the weak is justified in the name of a higher ethics of will to power. On this view, while one might criticise the tyrant who gets what he wants through oppressing, enslaving and brutalising others from a conventional moral perspective, insofar as success at getting what one wants is the heart and soul of human happiness and flourishing, how could one deny that the successful but cruel tyrant has virtue and at least flourishes in that sense?

While any such case for the virtuous tyrant may grate on modern ears – attuned, as these are, to a more distinctly *moral* (precisely post-Socratic) sense of virtue – it would have seemed fairly good sense to many of Socrates’ contemporaries. To be sure, this ethics of success – of personal assertion over grovelling subservience, of might over right – may even then have been something of a vestige or relic of a former ‘heroic’ Greek morality of pre-democratic Athens. In this light, one might regard the chief stock-in-trade of the sophists – the teaching of rhetoric – as a belated attempt to update this heroic ethics for a new political context in which self-assertion or the imposition of one’s will over others depended less on force of arms and more on one’s capacity to bend others to one’s will through more devious persuasion in the Athenian democratic assemblies. Hence, sophists such as Gorgias (Plato, 1961a) described rhetoric as the very highest and most useful of human arts or skills and made a lucrative living selling their services as teachers of this art to the (male) offspring of the Athenian well-to-do with a view to helping them win friends and influence people.

In order to grasp fully why Socrates found this morally objectionable, one needs to appreciate that the effectiveness of rhetoric depended not at all on the logic or validity of any arguments deployed, or upon the truth of any conclusions thereby derived. Precisely, all that mattered was that those at whom rhetoric was directed should be *persuaded* by such arguments or claims – to the
advantage of the rhetorician. In this light, Socrates is at pains in Plato’s dialogue *Gorgias* to show that rhetoric cannot be considered a genuine art or skill – precisely insofar as arts and skills entail genuine *knowledge* directed towards the production of some genuine human benefit. Thus, Socrates strikingly contrasts medicine and gymnastics – skills or arts grounded in knowledge of what is of *actual* benefit to human health – with cosmetics and cookery, both ‘bogus’ arts concerned merely to flatter the palate or conceal the reality of human health and appearance. Socrates precisely places rhetoric in the same category as cosmetics and cookery rather than medicine and gymnastics. This question of the *epistemic* status of any expertise reckoned to be contributory to human flourishing is crucial to Socrates’ arguments against the sophists that success in satisfying personal desires or ambitions cannot be sufficient – or even *necessary* – for human virtue or excellence.

Hence, the great sophistical challenge to Socrates is to show how the forms of gratification that the wicked tyrant gains through unjust means should not be considered part of any really flourishing or happy life – and to that extent, expressive of excellence or virtue. Indeed, Socrates attempts to press the strongest possible case that not only should the tyrant not be considered happy or flourishing, but that he should be regarded as *unhappy* and *pitiable*. Unsurprisingly, most of his opponents respond to this claim with some incredulity. Indeed, their incredulity is heightened when Socrates insists, against those who want to claim that tyrants must be fortunate if they get away with their crimes, that they are in that case even *more* unfortunate: in short, that they would be less unhappy if they were caught and punished for their wrongdoings. Indeed, while the Platonic dialogues hail from a far-distant time and place, one might well expect such incredulity to be echoed in contemporary responses. Does it not jar generally with common sense to say otherwise: that great train robbers or other criminals who get away with their crimes are more ‘fortunate’ if they go ‘Scot-free’ than if they are caught and punished?

Insofar, Socrates seems to have been proposing a fairly radical revision of notions of flourishing and happiness as commonly used – as well as of the received ancient Greek sense of virtue or excellence – which was certainly to have enormous influence on subsequent normative theory. Moreover, the Socratic conception of human flourishing or happiness from which his critique of rhetoric follows seems grounded on a notion of the health of the ‘soul’ that may sound rather archaic to modern ears, and Socrates – followed by Plato – may have subscribed to a ‘dualist’ philosophical anthropology somewhat at odds with modern post-Darwinian and other scientific sensibilities. On this view, we are invited to observe a difference of *kind* between the mentality and conduct of human and non-human creatures that makes much of the distinctive *epistemic* capacities of the former. This difference is wonderfully illustrated in a short story by the modern British novelist Sebastian Faulks in which a precocious child explains to her mother how she knows that she is not a monkey. She points out that whereas monkeys are unaware that they are monkeys,
humans know that they are humans (Faulks, 2013, p. 120). This, she maintains, is what distinguishes (rational) human agents from all non-humans. This explanation is wholly in the spirit of Plato.

Whether or not this point implies strict metaphysical dualism, it is (rightly, on the present view) anti-reductionist. For Socrates and Plato, the human capacity for knowledge – knowledge of the world as such, but more particularly knowledge of oneself, one’s own appetites and desires and of one’s relations with other knowing agents, elevates human life and agency to a level that differs not just in degree but in kind from that of insects, rodents, sheep, cows and even monkeys – even though such creatures can act in the world and be said either to flourish or wane. For Socrates and Plato, this capacity for knowledge has significant implications for what it is to live well as a human agent and effectively redefines what it means for such an agent to be a virtuous or excellent human specimen. Indeed, such capacity is presupposed by the possibility of moral virtue and conduct, since without this – and the responsibility for one’s actions that it enables – there can be nothing much worth calling morality. Insofar as non-human brutes are innocent of reason and knowledge, they can have no aspirations to moral virtue, no responsibility for their actions and cannot be (other than figuratively) praised or blamed for their conduct. By the same token, insofar as such rational and epistemic engagement with the world does not extend to moral sensibility and responsibility, no one may be considered an exemplary specimen of humankind or to be living fully as a human agent.

At all events, it seems to be on something like this basis that Socrates rejects the idea of the flourishing or ‘happy’ tyrant. Indeed, a key move in Socrates’ argument is to question whether the wicked tyrant, driven by insatiable appetites, is – insofar as what is distinctive about human agency is that it ought to be responsive to well-grounded reasons – acting as a mature human agent at all. While non-human brutes may certainly act freely or voluntarily (at least as unconstrained) their freedom does not follow from rational choice or decision and is entirely determined by their instincts, appetites or desires. So, for example, a brute will gorge until sated and gorge when hungry again – and it would be odd to suppose that a lion or crocodile might plan its meals to save the tasty bits for later (or, if it did so, to take such behaviour to be the result of ‘planning’). To that extent, brutes are ‘enslaved’ by drives, appetites and desires that they cannot control. Socrates takes the insatiable craving of the tyrant for fresh pleasures and satisfactions to be compulsive in just this way, comparing the subject of it to a ‘leaky bucket’ needing to be constantly refilled. Insofar as the wicked are so compelled, they lack the rational discernment and responsibility of genuine human agency.

In this vein, the precise Socratic case against the notion of the happy or flourishing tyrant is that he is either ignorant, or (what may or may not be the same thing) has a defective understanding, of what is really in his own best interests. Here, more controversially, Socrates argues that if wicked agents really grasped or knew the consequences of the actions to which their ill-advised desires or
appetites drove them, they would not perform them. In short, the problem of the wicked – and the cause of their moral failure – is essentially epistemic: they lack the wisdom or knowledge required for – indeed, for Socrates, it is virtually tantamount to – the moral virtue of true human excellence. In sum, no human agent may be considered virtuous who is in this way ignorant or lacking in wisdom – and if an agent is ignorant or unwise, he cannot be said to fare well or flourish in any worthwhile sense. It is for this reason that Socrates insists the wicked agent would be better off exposed and punished for his crimes than getting away with them: Macbeth is tempted from virtue by vain and false ambitions – which also, significantly, led to his downfall and death. But would it not have been better for Macbeth – as a human soul – to have been taken alive, subjected to ‘correction’ and have repented his crimes?

Of course, insofar as Socrates’ notion of ‘happiness’ or flourishing here departs significantly from that of his sophistical opponents, they may also seem at some cross purposes. To be sure, Socrates’ notion of happiness or flourishing seems much closer to that of J. S. Mill when he observed that it is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool (or pig) satisfied (Mill, 1970). However, the ‘pig/fool satisfaction’ notion of happiness is well entrenched in common usage: indeed, it may be not too far from the idea of ‘subjective wellbeing’, often employed by modern psychological and other social scientists bent on estimating or measuring human happiness. In this sense, it cannot be denied that the wicked tyrant is happy at least to the extent that he feels happy. But, of course, the sense of happiness or flourishing that Socrates seeks to identify also has normative warrant. To be sure, people who are unreflective, living demonstrably wretched, even abused and exploited lives may consider themselves to be happy, when it is clear for all who have eyes to see that their lot is one that no sane or sensible person could admire or envy. That said, we often do admire (if not envy) those whose lives of struggle in a worthy cause may not have been over-furnished with pleasure, comfort or subjective wellbeing. What strains the credulity of Socrates’ interlocutors – and is precisely challenged by Socrates – is the idea that some of those we may be tempted to envy because they have metaphorically if not literally ‘got away with murder’ are not to be admired or envied. Are the crooks living the life of Reilly on their ill-gotten gains in South America really to be pitied? Wouldn’t we all really love to be in that position if we could get away with it? Socrates – and, following him, Plato – says ‘no’: not, that is, if we can also see that such happiness is based on vanity and self-delusion.

Still, to reinforce this point, Socrates (and following him Plato) needs to make the case not just that knowledge or wisdom is necessary for virtue, but that there can be knowledge and wisdom of the normatively significant kind to which they lay claim. To be sure, it is clear that humans need knowledge for many of the materially productive enterprises in which they are humanly engaged. But by virtue of what knowledge or principled reflection might wicked agents come to see that they are behaving morally badly? Less dramatically, what may convince us that an easy-going life by which we benefit comfortably from
some self-interested cutting of legal or moral corners (for example, tax-evasion or sharp business practice) is less worthy or admirable than coronary-inducing self-sacrifice for a charitable cause from which we may expect little thanks or remuneration. It is essentially this question with which the Socratic dialogues of Plato struggle with variable success — sometimes confident that there is or must be such knowledge, at other times virtually despairing of it.

There would seem to be two general perspectives on the significance of knowledge for moral life and association in the Platonic dialogues that we might use the names of Socrates and Plato to label. On the first, here called ‘Socratic’ view, knowledge is crucially important for moral virtue because it helps rid us of various vain and egoistic misperceptions and attachments and helps us to see the world, ourselves and our relations with others more clearly and correctly. The key point is that we all too often err morally because we are misled by pride and vanity, misread the motives and intentions of others and have false or distorted understanding of the meaning of such key moral concepts as justice, courage and honour. This idea of the moral significance of knowledge, notably defended and developed in modern times by the philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch (1970, 2003), is a morally significant one and should not be lost sight of. In the present view, we should regard such concern to get things right as a necessary condition of moral virtue (see Carr, 2016). However, the trouble seems to be that Plato’s Socrates seems to regard it as also sufficient. But this is far from obvious: someone may well have a clear understanding of what is good and true, without commitment to doing what is good and true.

This Socratic view also seems to take a somewhat ‘open-ended’, provisional or inconclusive view of knowledge. In this regard, the classic Socratic method of *elenchus* is confined to the ‘modest’ task of exposing, through regular dialogue and discussion, the various erroneous opinions of agents and is more cautious or tentative of the possibility of discerning moral knowledge of a fixed and final kind or form. This, however, is something for which Plato seems to be seeking in such dialogues as *Republic* and *Theaetetus*. Hence, the avowed aim of so-called Platonic ‘dialectic’, is to move well beyond the investigation and refutation of mere ‘opinions’ to discover, through pure rational enquiry, moral or normative truths that have the same — or even greater — epistemic certainty as the truths of logic and mathematics. The end result of this ambitious Platonic quest, however, seems to be a highly questionable (albeit historically influential) account of knowledge and a deeply illiberal and anti-democratic theory of justice — as the near-totalitarian rule of the unwashed majority by rulers supposed to know what is best for them — that many modern commentators (notably Popper, 2002) have considered the perfect recipe for political injustice. In any case, the epistemic grounds or normative principles upon which Plato’s ‘wise’ elite might come to know what is morally best for others are never finally made clear, despite Plato’s detailed attempt to describe how his ideal state should be run.

Even so, there is something to be learned from what we have roughly called the Socratic and Platonic accounts of the significance of knowledge for moral