

Christian anthropology and Aristotle's character ethics

Teachers, whether Christian or not, know that children are not little machines and education is not simply there to produce productive citizens. They know that education is a value-laden concept comprising more than skills and tests, and recognise that our education system is largely fragmented and far too specialised to the extent that it often ignores the whole person. They recognise that there is no unifying ideal or set of coherent principles that exist within modern Western public education to counter the powerful forces of the state's agencies, which all too often seek to use 'education' for their own political purposes. The modern liberal state has no particular conception of the 'Good', but rather defends the idea of 'rights' within an instrumental-orientated education and schooling. This utilitarian philosophy of education continues to dominate modern education systems, even when teachers believe it to be inadequate. Teachers, whatever their political stance, want to teach certain subjects, in a certain way, to enable students to reason, think and determine what ought to be. They want their students to think critically, to make a significant contribution to society, to be good citizens, and to embrace certain virtues like tolerance, honesty and integrity. Teachers have various moral responsibilities and clearly face moral dilemmas in teaching.

Pring (2001: 110) notes that education can be 'conceived as a moral practice concerned with values and conceptions of what it is to be human'. It is not surprising therefore, that many in educational literature claim that education is inherently a moral enterprise. Pring (2001: 106) also observes that:

Teaching, therefore, is more than a set of specific actions in which a particular person is helped to learn this or that. It is an activity in which the teacher is sharing in a moral enterprise, namely, the initiation of (usually) young people into a worthwhile way of seeing the world, of experiencing it, of relating to others in a more human and understanding way.

Education certainly seeks to make people better and is inevitably concerned with an idea of what it is to be a human being.

While many think that, in order to educate, it is important to understand what it is to be a human being, they generally are unable to come to a consensus of what this

would entail by way of a sound philosophy of the human being. A Christian approach is not so limited, and those teaching within a Christian school can turn to Christianity to get an idea of what it is to be human. Education in character and virtues is not simply concerned with life, but ultimately with the purpose of life itself. It is concerned with human excellence, which consists of realising to the highest extent possible our distinctive capacities and how a person's dispositions, practices and ways of living must be formed in order to lead to that goal. Christian moral teaching has an interest in the interiority of the person, or the person's character, since actions are always an expression of the person. Christian character education is concerned with the formation, nurture and development of Christian virtues that ultimately constitute Christian character, and therefore it entails basic normative premises about what is good and right and the kind of dispositions education should foster, including the methods education should employ. All education is based on the expectations that students ought to learn certain things that are taught. Therefore, Christian education is an intentional process of building character through nurturing those virtues that assist us in our ultimate end – friendship with God, sanctioned in generous action and friendship to the stranger. The essence of friendship is selflessness in which we must desire the good of others. This process of forming one's own character is itself rewarding and, once developed, self-sustaining.

Contemporary education, dominated as it is with wholly instrumental goals, leaves untouched the meaning and purpose of human life or subjectivises it. Expressive individualism has come to dominate how our culture understands the purpose of life. This leads to the celebration of modern 'virtues' such as doubt, suspicion, independence, of getting in touch with our feelings. It is also rare to hear educationalists talk about ultimate purposes in life, despite character and virtues education beginning with the idea of purpose; Damon (2009) being the notable exception. Our schools, even when they commit to forming character and virtue in their students, are too often unconnected with an overarching purpose of life. They say nothing about the purpose of human life other than what each individual says it is. We need to avoid excessive individualism, which modern education sometimes promotes. Without sustained attention to a clear understanding of the common good it is difficult to achieve the larger sense of shared purpose in education. Character should not be seen as something private and simply a matter of competence. Education cannot be restricted to its utility value, reduced to the transfer of consumer goods – a product focused narrowly on skills, capacities and competencies. Despite a school's published citizenship, social, emotional or personal development programme 'aims', such initiatives are means not ends. These schools can lack a *telos*, or end, or destination for life because modern secular ethical theories of character fail to provide a complete picture of human moral experience. Modern conceptions of the human being are reductionist and rely on measurable and observable data, which cannot answer fundamental questions about the nature of the human person.

In contrast, an Aristotelian-Thomist teleological model offers a philosophy of education based on an overarching conception of the nature and purpose of human life. In addition, it provides a comprehensive analysis of character virtues,

including the definition of the virtues and an examination of their nature. It provides a serious adaptation of an Aristotelian framework for moral character virtues, in which the goals of education are to facilitate the human *telos*, the purpose of human being. For Aristotle, the *telos* of a human being is to live a life worth living. A life worth living is living a good life, which is a life lived according to the virtues. The grand Christian narrative in this scheme is that we are created by God to enjoy eternal life, and therefore traditionally the goal of Catholic education was a preparation for death. Today we would say that the student is prepared for life here and hereafter, and this could be said to be the Christian teleology of education. Most Christian schools do not define themselves in such uncompromising terms, but rather offer goals that are more benign. Even if we settle on an Aristotelian-Thomist-inspired approach, we also need to recognise that there are diverse accounts and reconstructions of this.

There are many ways to introduce and understand Christian ideas of virtue and character, but this text employs a largely Aristotelian-Thomist framework to avoid the tendency to switch between different moral theories in order to justify particular moral choices. An Aristotelian-Thomist framework for a virtuous life uses our reason and the Christian sources of morality to provide a largely normative, corrective and prescriptive moral approach. There are two common, but often polarised and hence problematic, positions on moral decision-making that can be identified in the literature. At one end there is a monistic view, which believes that there is only one single position on each issue, e.g., abortion, euthanasia and murder are always wrong irrespective of the social and cultural circumstances in which they occur. This position is contrary to both Aristotle and Aquinas, and contrary to the work of Christian casuistry. While there are absolute prohibitions, neither Aristotle nor Aquinas held that there are absolute positive requirements keyed to kinds of act. There is usually more than one good thing that can be done in any particular set of circumstances. At the other end there is a pluralist perspective that believes in a wide diversity of positions, i.e., Christians can have any view on any position, and each is worthy of respect. It is a perspective which believes that individuals or Churches can advocate, on some issues, a position opposite to traditional Christian teaching, e.g., legalised abortion and euthanasia can be supported. Yet this is a false dichotomy. There is space for seeking discernment and there are absolute prohibitions, which, on their own, are inadequate to supply a complete moral code. Knowing all the things that I must never do is not enough to show me what I ought to do in any difficult situation.

In a particular Christian monistic view, definite answers are usually given because those who adhere to this approach believe that it is based on a coherent Christian framework that has an underlying moral principle to justify the answers offered. There is effectively one way for deciding moral correctness because God has commanded us to follow his precepts, say, for example, in the ethical precepts of the Bible. In contrast, the pluralist view postulates that there can be no right answers, and this view appeals to the modern mind-set, attracted as it is to the idea that morality is so complicated that no single approach will do. Strangely, both a monistic and

pluralistic view can be absolutist in the sense that they often claim that their moral conclusions are right. Many secular people are probably ethical pluralists, but many still lean towards, and hope for, a monistic view. This is because they want decision-making to be less complicated and less frustrating where a pluralist approach can be subjective, inconsistent and wholly dependent on one's self interests. Morality for Christians, on the other hand, cannot simply be the product of cultural practice or social convention that changes according to time and place, otherwise we can end up with secularised versions of Christian morality. New knowledge will improve our understanding of certain issues, but prohibitions on murder, for example, remain. Pluralism can lead to moral viewpoints that are equally right and equally wrong, or result in situations where if the majority says that something is acceptable, then it is, in the sense that it is impossible for the majority to make ethical errors. A pluralist view has certain internal contradictions, and principles often overlap with each other. As Callicutt (1990: 115) says, we cannot be utilitarians one moment and Aristotelians the next, in the same way we cannot allow consequentialism to serve for some moral decisions and Aristotelianism for others. He argues that we need one approach because moral pluralism is simply playing 'metaphysical musical chairs'.

Christian education in character and virtues requires an uncompromising notion of what the end of education is, and this requires us to seek this notion in a Christian anthropology. The way to construct a philosophy of life for education is to have a clear idea of what human beings are. In the Christian sense, this is inseparable from God's active relation to human beings, such that their character and virtues are always dependent upon God. In this relationship with God, we have a voice and we are 'co-creators' in building character virtues. Christian wisdom is therefore more than secular wisdom as it includes Christian theology. This is why the Christian Scripture is the first place to which the Christian educator must turn.

Scripture and character

In Christianity, the primary source for understanding character virtues is found in the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament. Jesus stresses the centrality of the virtues of justice and mercy over the old Jewish laws with their emphasis on a ritualistic ethics of purity and cult offerings (Leviticus and Deuteronomy). Jesus understood the Mosaic Law (*Matthew* 5–7) as giving priority to the good intentions of the human agent, rather than simply following rules. The key virtue is named as love (1 *John* 4, 9), which is to be directed to the needs of neighbours, the poor and strangers. Hauerwas (1981: 66) argues that the Bible and the Christian community that it shaped provide the context for valuing and acting upon Scripture's moral guidelines. As he writes: 'The moral use of Scripture, therefore, lies precisely in the power to help us remember the stories of God for the continued guidance of our community and of individual lives.' In this way, the Christian's character is shaped by the dynamic Christian community, rather than following laws or rules alone. Rules are generally not derived from some conception of the human good, and

they are only the basis of moral decision-making to the extent that they represent consensus about what is considered necessary for societal functioning. Rules help to articulate and give guidance to the fundamental inclination that human beings have to the good. Scripture informs moral decisions, and the virtues that are constitutive of Christian character speak of the communal call of discipleship. A Christian disciple is, by definition, one who follows Christ and reads the Scriptures to learn the ways in which Christ lived by observing his virtues. Consequently, having to make a decision is less urgent for someone who lives the Christian life. Harrington and Keenan (2002: 197) are clear that the virtue language naturally arises from Scripture and that these distinctly Christian virtues qualify character. They say a normative description of the virtues is always presented and that, through a deeper relationship with God, we are transformed into God's people. We grow our Christ-like character through increasing in these Biblical virtues and becoming the servant of all. These moral guidelines need to be practised as an expression of the Christian faith, and through this practice they produce virtues that strengthen our Christian character and enable us to carry out good works joyfully for God's glory.

There are a number of classic examples of moral teaching contained in the New Testament. The Sermon on the Mount in *Matthew's* Gospel stands out immediately as offering us a description of the 'ways of wisdom that lead to holiness and perfection through living the virtues and the precepts' (Pinckaers, 2001: 8). This sermon relates more to the spiritual life of the Christian rather than to the moral virtues, but it places moral obligations upon us. Pinckaers calls Jesus's sermon the 'charter of the Christian life', since it sets out a way of life that leads to our happiness by being formed in the goodness of God. In these Beatitudes, Jesus promises happiness to the lowly and humble, to those who hunger for holiness more than for power or wealth, to those generous with mercy and who are reluctant to condemn, and to peacemakers who will suffer violence rather than inflict it. These are the virtues and attributes that constitute happiness for the Christian and, like all of the virtues, they need to be practised. In a series of key texts, St. Paul, particularly in the Letter to the *Romans* (12–15), exhorts that we should seek what is humble, overcome evil with good, love our neighbours, show generosity and charity to all, and recommends many other virtues. He says:

Let love be sincere, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with fraternal affection; anticipate one another in showing honour. Do not grow slack in zeal, be fervent in the Spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in affliction, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality.

(Romans 12: 9–13)

These virtues are part of what is normally called the 'fruits of the Spirit' (see *Galatians* 5: 22–23) and St. Paul presents the Christian life as the pursuit of Godly virtues, which abound in his writings and those of St. Peter and St. James (see *Ephesians* 4: 2–

3; *Philippians* 4: 8–9; *Colossians* 3: 12–14; *James* 3: 14–17; and *Peter* 1: 5–7). The virtues in the New Testament reflect the perfect character of God; for the Christian, their cause is the Holy Spirit, their goal is love, with Christ as their model.

The Old and New Testaments are full of attempts to arrive at wisdom, and the *telos* of Christian education is to attain this ultimate state. Christians believe in a personal God and have a distinctive belief in the Incarnation – ‘the Word became Flesh, and dwelt among us’. Christianity also understands wisdom as one of the names for Christ (*Sophia*) so that philosophy, as the love of wisdom, is understood as the love of Christ. As Tom Wright (2010: 257), a New Testament scholar, says, the Christian virtues are based on the answer to the question ‘How shall we live?’ He provides, from his extensive study of the New Testament, a clear list of virtues or character traits generated from the life, vision, achievements, death and resurrection of Jesus himself. The Christian must rely on the transforming power of grace for virtuous character. Christian ethics therefore seeks a relationship with a living God whose will for each of us has to be discovered through faith. Consequently, theology is the basis for Christian formation, and this theology needs to be in evidence in the educational philosophy, the pedagogy and the curriculum of any character education initiative. This formation is the deliberate divine and human effort to acquire the virtues that are consistent with the Christian faith.

As we have seen, Christians are called by God ‘to be conformed to the image of his Son’ (*Romans* 8:29–30), to ‘put on Christ’, to ‘follow Christ’ and to ‘be transformed into the likeness of Christ’. Christ is ‘the way, and the truth and the life’ (*John* 14: 6). This is a process of character formation, which means that to ‘act like Christ’ requires conformity to both revealed law and natural law. The former is deduced from Scripture and Tradition, while the latter is reasoned from universal principles that are accessible to all through the proper use of reason and insight. They include: (a) knowledge of moral goodness, (b) a desire to be good and do the good, and to avoid what is perceived as evil, (c) a well-formed conscience to guide, to judge and create a sense of obligation to execute the right and the good for all, (d) an array of firmly established habits of virtuous behaviours that evoke good character and, finally, (e) an orientation to will the good in others and to seek union with God. It is not sufficient to do God’s will, we must also ‘will’ to do it: a combination of a life of excellent rational activity (Aristotelianism) and reason looking to God for direction (Christianity). This means the Christian needs to be realistic, seeing things as they are, but above all using the Christian sources of moral decision-making (the authority contained in scripture, tradition, reason and experience) as the basis for deriving life-enhancing ethical guidelines.

The early Christian fathers and character

The early Christians distanced themselves from the surrounding culture, but not from the idea of human nature. Nevertheless, as it expanded in Europe, Christianity moved towards an ethics of duty rather than virtue, but a concern for character and the character dispositions which are commonly called virtues did not disappear.

Aristotle's ideas became more prominent in the thirteenth century with their re-discovery, but they confronted Christians with a challenge – could these pagan ideas of human nature be integrated with a Christian theology of grace? The development of character virtues was sometimes seen as a concept of self-mastery or improvement that was in tension with the Christian ethics of self-denial and sacrifice. Thomas looked for a synthesis, but one in which Aristotelian concepts were subordinated to an overall Christian vision and framework. The natural cardinal virtues of the here and now were seen as preparing the way for the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. In Christianity, there is no escaping the idea of virtue, since a life of virtue is part of the Christian life. As Wright (2010: 35) says: 'Jesus and his followers are offering the three-dimensional model toward which Aristotle's two-dimensional one points.' Aristotle only glimpses the true goal of human flourishing, but Jesus, Paul and the early Christians have a vision which is larger and richer. Wright (2010: 70) goes on to say that Christian virtue is not about you, your happiness, your fulfilment and your self-improvement, but rather it is about God, God's Kingdom and your discovery of a genuine human existence. He says: 'Aristotle's vision of the virtuous person always tended to be that of the "hero" – the moral giant striding through the world doing great deeds and gaining applause' (2018: 70). The Christian vision highlights the loving, generous character who does not draw attention to themselves – we are not at the centre of the picture. Wright seems to imply that Aristotle's theory is about egoistic personal well-being only, rather than communal well-being. The authentic Christian message is about our real happiness in this life, as well as promoting God's Kingdom – they are not mutually exclusive as Wright seems to suggest.

Some Christian authors, such as Eusebius of Caesarea, saw Greek philosophy as a *preparatio evangelica* (a preparation for the Gospel). One reason for this was that the authors of the pagan literature believed three things (Anton, 2018: 94). First, that wisdom is not solely a human characteristic, but rather belongs to the divine. Second, that human wisdom consists in participating in the divine wisdom – it consists in seeing the world as the gods see it and responding accordingly. Third, that to have such perception of the Cosmos requires appropriate moral habituation, so wisdom cannot be gained through purely intellectual pursuit but requires a broad development of character. For the Greeks, the goal of ethics was virtue or virtuous character, and its purpose was to teach us how to *be*, rather than teach us how to *act*. Aristotle himself thought that *Sophia* (Wisdom) was the highest form of truth, which aided contemplation of the eternal truths – this appears to be on the path to mysticism. He did have some conception of an ultimate reality and some good beyond the human good, but Aristotle's ultimate reality did not possess any character attributes that might enable imitation for ordinary citizens. He may have had a sense or intimation of the ultimate good but could not tell us how to reach it. The standard Greek view was that the purpose of education/culture was to form character through the cultivation or habituation of virtue. The intended moral messages in Greek culture were largely uniform, with common moral norms and consistent examples of moral behaviour set by the whole community in their roles, in entertainment, in ritual, and so on (see Barrow, 2007: 81, and Arthur, 2020).

The early Fathers, when they engaged with Greek philosophical ideas about character and virtues, were already rooted in Scripture. While Plato, Aristotle and Stoicism influenced early Christian thought, Wogaman (2011: 23) reminds us that this should not be regarded as a departure from the legacy of Scripture. In the second century of the Roman Empire, Clement played an important part in developing a Christian education within a dominant non-Christian culture. Education at this time was largely experienced as a training in skills needed to function in society, but it also conveyed a pagan worldview. Clement, as a Christian thinker, used a Greek philosophical framework in his educational proposals, which sometimes caused him to be seen as suspect by the Christian community. Nevertheless, he did not see education as necessary for or the cause of salvation. Instead, he saw education as a gift of God, and something that is a good in this life. The virtues, he believed, were necessary for growth in character, which he saw as the primary goal of education. In his work *Paidagogos* or *The Instructor*, Clement outlines how to live as a Christian by focusing on character formation in which the cultivation of the virtues is seen as more important than knowledge. He saw no necessary conflict between faith and reason and used Greek philosophy to understand the Christian faith through his emphasis on the use of 'reasoning' (Wogaman, 2011: 40). Clement was the first Church Father to begin a serious formulation of a theory of Christian education, and he was followed by Origen who further developed his ideas.

Early Christians understood the moral life as a matter of formation in the virtues by seeing and imitating moral exemplars, such as Christ, the saints, parents and teachers, as well as ordinary Christians. They conceived of ethics as integral to the whole of the Christian religion, and they were influenced by a number of sources and pressures. For example, they were indebted to the Hebrew Scriptures, but interpreted in the light of Christ in the New Testament. They also were indebted to the ethical thinking on Stoicism and Platonism. This background set the agenda for Augustine, who in turn set the agenda for Thomas. In particular, the increasing emphasis on right intentions and motives comes from Augustine's idea of the will as the seat of morality (see Bejczy and Newhauser, 2005: 2). By the twelfth century, moral thought had become much more systematic through a greater focus on Aristotle, which influenced how character was understood and formed.

In addition, the Jewish literature had also found a consensus in the classical scholars since much of what was said could already be found in the Jewish wisdom literature that greatly influenced the development of early Christianity. The Greek moral discourse was clearly prevalent at the time of the early Christian Fathers. However, the Christian God was totally different from the pagan gods and demanded unconditional faith – something that was unthinkable for the Greeks. Christians had different ideas about the virtue necessary for wisdom. Nevertheless, Wright (2010: 70) insists that Aristotle points us in the right direction. Virtues are usually divided into two groups in the Christian tradition – theological virtues: faith, hope, love; and cardinal virtues: justice, prudence, temperance and fortitude. The first group concern themselves directly with God, while the second group apply to Christians and non-Christians alike. However, for the Christian, the

cardinal virtues are only understood and lived through God's grace, which means we can say that there is also a group of virtues that we can call the infused cardinal virtues. The Christian faith matters for how we live, and the cardinal virtues, which are mentioned in Scripture (*Wisdom* 8.7), are transformed by God's grace. This grace enhances our natural capacities so that we deal with the concerns of life in a way that is informed by our supernatural end. The cardinal virtues in Christian writing are derived from the Pauline literature (1 *Corinthians* 13:13), which gives precedence to the virtue of charity. Porter (2001: 103) explains the roles of the cardinal virtues in this way:

Prudence or practical wisdom ... enables the agent to choose in accordance with the overall conception of goodness; justice orients the will towards the common good; courage shapes the irascible passions in such a way as to resist obstacles to attaining what is truly good; and temperance shapes the passions of desire in such a way that the agent desires what is truly in accordance with the overall good.

Aristotle and Thomas

Aristotle's philosophical ideas exerted huge influence on the moral systems developed by many of the greatest Christian minds in the Western tradition, including Thomas, who was part of the first generation of scholars to examine Aristotelian character virtues. There are many similarities with Aristotle in the approach adopted by Thomas, but the differences are just as important. Thomas uses many different vocabularies because he saw human actions as both multiple and particular, and the intentions for these acts he saw as many and complex. He uses the terminologies found in scripture, Aristotle, Plato, the Stoics, Gregory, Augustine, Bede and many others. Many who discuss Thomas's ethics usually understand it as largely Aristotelian in origin, albeit with some differences attributed to their individual worldviews. Aristotle's culture is Greek and pagan even if Aristotle himself was a deist, while Thomas's culture is Christian, founded on the Trinity of persons that is God. Ralph McInerney (1993: 23–24) comments on what he views as the Aristotelianism of Aquinas's ethics in the *Summa Theologiae*: 'The dominant voice in these questions is that of Aristotle It is fair to say that these discussions would have been unthinkable apart from the influence of Aristotle, particularly, though by no means exclusively, of his *Nicomachean Ethics*.' Anthony Kenny (1999) explains Thomas's attempt to knit scripture into his discussion of ethics by saying:

The endeavour to bring together the evangelical and the Nicomachean texts can hardly be regarded as successful What is remarkable about this rapprochement is not that it is done successfully but that it is done at all. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the Christian texts are distorted to fit the Aristotelian context, rather than the other way around.

Thomas's ethics is often viewed as a kind of virtue ethics, centred around the cardinal virtues that Christianity appropriated largely from the Greeks. In contrast to many other academics, however, Jean Porter (2005) insists that there is 'a ... tendency among Aquinas scholars, ... misleading and ... prevalent ... to read Aquinas as if he not only baptized Aristotle, but is himself little more than Aristotle baptized'. In other words, Thomas's ethics is not a Christianised Aristotelianism, but rather Thomas using Aristotle as the servant of his thinking. For Thomas, no secular or manmade happiness, like Aristotelian *eudaemonist* virtue, was sufficient. While Thomas's works used the rich moral vocabulary of Aristotle, ultimately, he altered the understanding of Aristotelian ethics.

The ethics of Thomas have a theological as well as a philosophical dimension. In terms of moral philosophy, Thomas's ethics can be read as a version of Aristotelian ethics in that knowledge of how we ought to act is independent of religious beliefs. However, it is wrong to therefore conclude that all Thomas is doing is adding Aristotle's virtues to religious faith, hope and love. Principe (1994: 85–89) observed of Thomas:

Like his teacher Albert, he saw no opposition between nature and grace or between truths discovered by reason and those revealed by God. It cannot be stressed too much ... that what Thomas intended to be was always primarily a theologian.

Essentially, the use of philosophy does not alter the basic theological intention of Thomas, as he wrote: 'grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it' (ST I, a. 1.8, ad 2). As O'Meara (1997) says:

Catholicism distinguishes between philosophy and theology, between the divine gift of being and that of grace. A moral theory is not Christian because an Aristotelian philosophy concludes with passages from the Bible or with virtues exemplified in Jesus, or because it exalts charity. It is Christian because it relates the Incarnation to human life.

The idea that our natural human life is a life exclusively of the world is rejected by Thomas since our supernatural life begins not with death, but with baptism. Thomas builds on the thoughts and works of the other great giant of Christian thought, St. Augustine of Hippo, whose knowledge of the works of Aristotle was limited and indirect. Plato's thinking had already begun to play a role in influencing the Christian intellectual tradition prior to Augustine (see Topping, 2012), and, while Augustine was generally hostile to some aspects of pagan thought, he himself was formed by a classical education, in which Plato was certainly a major influence. Plato's ethical framework for the virtuous life and its implications for education was broadly in line with Aristotle, his student, and Augustine did not hesitate to seek what was true and useful from this pagan tradition: Augustine was also indebted to Aristotle's conception of the good life (Miller, 2012: 73) in that

Augustine was similarly concerned with what good we should want to make us happy as well as how to obtain this good in practice.

Augustine

Thomas follows Augustine in much of what he said about ethics, including that human beings are composed of body and soul and are rational. Augustine, in turn, was influenced by Plato's analysis, that as human beings we are endowed with a unique kind of reasoning capacity for understanding that which is good. As Barrow (2007: 76) says, Augustine believed, following Plato, that: 'The educated person should have an understanding of the good, be guided and inspired by it, and seek to act according to it.' Plato was an early advocate of the teleological approach to virtue – that is, that virtues are defined in terms of functions and ends. Virtues are qualities of excellence that help human beings rule themselves well, deliberate better and thereby live well. Augustine clearly accepted the classical view that to possess the virtues is to have human excellence and that the virtues are constitutive of being a good person. He believed that a virtuous character develops out of the reflective performance of virtuous acts. Thomas affirms Augustine's definition of a virtue – virtue is a good quality of the mind by which one lives righteously, of which no one can make bad use, and through which God works in us without us. Thomas also accepts Augustine's rejection of determinism – the view that human beings are fully determined by their physical and biological natures to act in particular ways. Yet, whereas Augustine saw human beings as created in the image of God to be free to make choices and bring about change in the world, he taught that free will was limited – constrained by the physical and moral laws limiting our freedom. These moral laws help us live well, and, if we follow God's will, then God is favourably inclined towards us. Augustine also taught that we need to cooperate with God if we are to gain happiness and that living well is none other than doing what God wills. We need to know and understand the moral law, and we can only be free if we genuinely know and understand rather than simply believe. Life is the quest for truth, and Augustine wrote that if we accept God's moral laws as a guide for our lives, then we can gain happiness.

The virtues, for Augustine, lead us to happiness and must penetrate the core of our being. The virtues help us to have balance in our lives, and the good is the pursuit of virtue. The formation of human beings in virtue is the aim of education, but those virtues must be grounded in the Christian faith. As Augustine said: 'Virtue is a good spiritual quality, by which we live rightly, and by which no one can put to bad use' (*De Libero Arbitrio* Bk II, c19). The idea of 'quality' meant habit in this understanding. Students are not to learn what the teacher thinks, but learn rather how to discern; to know and understand what they come to believe. In other words, to discern whether truth has been stated. For Augustine, the end of our journey is life with God – at which point we are returned to God. The supreme good is therefore eternal life and for Augustine: we cannot reach God on our own for we are entirely dependent on God's grace. Thus, we must be

receptive to God in order for us to be helped in the practice of a life of virtue so that good is done and pursued while evil is to be avoided. Augustine sees the virtues as manifestations of love, and in *On the Morals of the Catholic Church* (15: 25, cited in Snow, 2018: 284–285) when he writes:

I hold that virtue is nothing than the perfect love of God. Now when it is said that virtue has a fourfold division [cardinal virtues], as I understand it, this is said in accordance with the various movements of love We may, therefore, define these virtues as follows: temperance is love preserving itself entire and incorrupt for God; courage is love readily bearing all things for the sake of God; justice is love only serving God, and therefore ruling well everything else that is subject to the human person; prudence is love discerning well between what helps it toward God and what it hinders.

These cardinal virtues lead to the higher love of God. For Augustine, a virtue becomes a vice without reference to God, but it is still possible to acquire virtues that contribute to the common good, but do not contribute to salvation.

It is often said that Augustine stands on the shoulders of Plato, while Thomas stands on the shoulders of Augustine. This is relatively easy to demonstrate in Thomas's *Summa Theologiae*, in which Thomas cites Augustine no fewer than 3,156 times, compared with 2,095 times for Aristotle. Thomas also cites the other Church Fathers 3,131 times. Nevertheless, Thomas modifies Augustine's view of the world as entirely sin-laden and disordered. Augustine also thought that the idea of pagan virtues was self-contradictory, while Thomas thought they were true human virtues, albeit imperfect. Thomas sees the world in more positive terms as rational, humane and ordered. He also has a more positive view of searching for earthly happiness, so long as it is subordinated to the final end of life with God. While the authors of the New Testament rarely mention virtue, the substance of the concept pervades their moral teaching. This is why the Church's earliest moral teaching has an understanding of virtue, even though the Church Fathers generally did so in the language of, and from the perspective of, Scripture. As Cahill (2002: 17) writes:

At the level of character formation, the Bible as story and narrative can engage and educate the full panoply of our moral capacities – the imagination, affections, and emotions, as well as the intellect. All of these are necessary to bring ethical theory and reasoning to the endpoint of committed action.

Cahill (2002: 10) offers a framework of biblical character ethics in which 'character' 'indicates a process of communal formation of individual identity' which 'orients Christian persons and communities around general values, principles or virtues that reflect God's self-disclosure in Christ'. It is difficult to overstate the centrality of Scripture in Christian character formation or the Christian community as the location for learning, practising and interpreting Scripture for Christian living.

Augustine, like Thomas, thereby applied Greek philosophy to Christian theology in a supportive role in the same way that St. Clement of Alexandria did in his use of Plato, maintaining Christian orthodoxy while using vocabulary and wisdom derived from Greek philosophy.

Aristotle

In exploring the Aristotelian part of the Aristotelian–Thomist framework, it is necessary to recognise at the outset that Aristotle’s thought does not easily lend itself to any modern theories of moral behaviour or what social scientists call ‘pro-sociality’. It is also true that virtue ethics as a field is too diverse to be defined by the term Aristotelian, as there is a multiplicity of approaches to virtue ethics. Nevertheless, modern secular thought shares with Aristotle the belief that human beings have within themselves the resources to become virtuous and lead flourishing lives. Aristotle begins his theory of ethics by stating that everything has its own goal and human beings have a *telos* or goal-directed activity to their humanity. This *telos* refers to the proper functions and ends associated with living things. Aristotle claimed that human beings possess a specific ‘human function’ of having a unique goal or purpose in life based on their nature. For Aristotle, all human beings seek happiness and this can be obtained through the careful use of reason and the acquisition of the virtues. According to Aristotle, ‘reasoning that leads to actions must start from the assumption of some end to be realized’ (Cooper, 1986: 76). Aristotle identifies at least three different understandings of happiness lived by three distinct groups in society. First, those who see happiness in pleasure and fun. Second, those who live as if happiness were honour and social recognition for their personal excellence and achievements. Third, a rare few who live as if happiness is learning and seeking wisdom – in other words philosophising. Most people are to be found in group one, a few in group two and a tiny number in group three. Aristotle does suggest a fourth group – those who are happy when they embrace wealth and money – but he rejects that this group can be genuinely happy and returns to a study of the *telos* of human life.

MacIntyre (1981: 52) writes that within this ‘teleological scheme there is a fundamental contrast between man-as-he-happens-to-be and man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature’. This conception of *telos* is central to Aristotle’s thought. He believed that our nature as human beings determines our purpose and that we are designed to be agents of goodness and virtue in order to fulfil our purpose in being good. When we are good, the *telos* of human life is fulfilled, and we consequently achieve happiness or human flourishing. This human flourishing is achieved by means of obtaining the virtues, normally by repetition of appropriate actions (habituation) under guidance to constitute what Aristotle called *eudaimonia* – being well and doing well. For Aristotle, we incline towards something – ‘the good is that which all things aim’ – and this ultimate good is not subordinated to any other good. Aristotle’s model is complex and holistic, involving interconnecting elements and human capacities that are perceptual, affective and deliberative. The flourishing life is one in which our thinking, feeling and acting conform harmoniously to the

good. This is a high achievement, and it requires the support of a community animated by the vision of the good. It requires the process of education to initiate it and to positively contribute to this goal. It requires a foundational anthropology at its heart, but there is a tension between what we happen to be and what we could be. The *telos* must be specific enough to provide guidance but not too restrictive as to reduce it to only a few ways of living. Wright (2010: 28) believes that three things transform our character: (a) aiming at the right goal, (b) understanding the steps to the next goal and (c) habituating these steps, making them a matter of second nature. In Russell's (2013: 19) view, *eudaimonia* is 'two things at once: it is the final end for practical reasoning, and it is a good human life for the one living it'. For Aristotle, it is the final and comprehensive end of life.

Habit forming is not about mindless activities but has a broader and richer meaning within moral theology. Habits are the more enduring qualities that make us a certain sort of person. From the Latin term *habitus*, the words 'dispositions' and 'inclinations' capture what habit means best. Although developed or obtained through repeated actions, they should not be seen as mechanistic and nor are they unchangeable. They are developed in people who are free, can reason, and have the will to persevere. They also include intentionality since our intentional actions shape our very selves. We have the freedom to choose well, and this leads us to fulfilment or happiness. When we possess a certain habit, we are inclined to more of such actions in the future – it becomes part of who we are and we exercise these habits effortlessly, to such an extent that we feel there is something wrong when we stop exercising it. Both Aristotle and Thomas called habits our 'second nature' because habits ingrain what a person does as well as form what a person is. Habit, as a disposition, changes who we are and resides within us. Virtue is a habit too and virtues are perfecting qualities, i.e., morality is a product of nurture, not raw nature. As Sullivan (2021: 491) says: 'the more perfect a habit of virtue is, the more forcefully does it make the will tend toward the good of that virtue'. While habit is an abiding quality in a person that inclines them to act in a certain way, a virtue is a habit that inclines them to act in a good manner, both externally and intentionally. Vice is the corresponding bad habit. Having the virtues is not simply about doing good works. Habits change us, and the virtuous person does good things more frequently and consistently, without having to think too much about their actions. It is really about the selves that we sculpt – a process of becoming. Moral development or character education, for Aristotle, is a process of learning to exhibit virtues in action (see Kristjánsson, 2014). However, the virtues themselves do not always provide actual answers about what one is to do in concrete situations. Rather, it seems that they equip the person with a sense of what is 'appropriate'. Aristotle does not so much tell us what virtue is, but rather that it aims at making us good persons. There is scope to explore how virtues help us to make moral decisions, but in this text, virtues are viewed as stable dispositions for the good that orient a person to act in a certain way that is continuous through the diversity of choices they make in concrete situations. Aristotle held that every virtue is located on a spectrum that places them between states of too much and too little. He adds

that the mean (the *via media*) must be determined in a way that takes into account the particular circumstances of the individual (*Ethics*, 1106a 36–37). Whilst he names justice, courage, temperance, magnificence, magnanimity, liberality, gentleness, prudence and wisdom as virtues, a more extended list is found in Plato's *Republic* and these virtues were expanded by writers such as Cicero in the Latin West, and later by Ss. Ambrose, Augustine and Thomas.

Phronesis, or practical wisdom, is essentially the union of both theory and practice, and Aristotle views it as the intellectual virtue that reigns over all the other virtues. Practical wisdom, as the integrating virtue, unifies all moral decisions into a coherent whole and arranges every decision and practice into a life of excellence (Darnell et al., 2019). Right reasons combined with the right feelings are key to Aristotle's definition of virtue. Phronesis-guided virtue includes the wisdom to know the good, the desire to achieve the good and the will to choose the good. It is a desire to see the good prevail even when no one else knows and when there is no reward for doing so. We cannot be wise without virtue. It emerges in human activity through the ability to recognise wisdom in others, which builds our moral character. Aristotle argues that good character that has been formed by a series of past decisions, begun initially by imitation, reinforced by repetition and informed by reflective reason, would choose correctly in moral decision-making. Anselm Mueller takes a simpler line, viewing phronesis as the intellectual aspect of good character generally, and the intellectual aspect of the implementation of each and every specific virtue.

Education is therefore concerned with the transition between human nature as it is and human nature as it could be. Consequently, certain actions, habits, capacities and inclinations are encouraged or discouraged because they take us away from, or towards, our *telos*. The virtues are essential components of the human good, and they largely constitute the *telos* in Aristotelian thinking. The virtues are also instruments or means to the good, but never merely instruments. They include all those states of character that influence how we act and choose and contribute to us becoming fully flourishing human beings. In this thinking, teachers are facilitators of character and human flourishing. Flourishing does not simply relate to the subjective aspect of human fulfilment, but to the meaningful realisation of life's overarching goals (Kristjánsson, 2020). Aristotle did not consider the specific virtues of the teacher mainly because teaching was not thought of as a proper task for a noble man and had, in ancient Greece, been tainted by association with the infamous sophists as private tutors. However, Christianity elevated the vocation of teaching, since Christian virtues require a robust concept of the moral exemplar to model what the virtues actually look like for students. Aristotle warns us however that the young are often controlled by their passions and only acquire the virtues through habituation, essentially by acting as if they already possess them. However, is this true virtue? Aristotle certainly thought that young children needed to gain knowledge of the good as well as enjoyment in doing the good. As Burnyeat (1980: 72) says, young children cultivate a 'general evaluative attitude which is not reducible to rules or precepts'. Children have a partial, but

developing, reasoned conception of the good. Hull (1910: 163) helpfully notes that ‘character is a life dominated by principles, as distinguished from life dominated by mere impulses from within and mere circumstances from without’, reminding us that we are more than simply what happens to us and always more than rule-governed behaviour. This is why Aristotle rarely speaks of rules because to him rules are secondary to, or derived from, virtues.

Aristotle thought that the proper function of human beings was to think rationally, from which he derived the idea that the highest life available to us is one of contemplation. He clearly believed in the power of human intelligence or ability to think, which he said distinguishes us from animals. We have the capacity to think, to analyse, to make choices, and to orient our lives in one direction or the other. Aristotle (*Ethics*, VI, 2 (1139 a 22–26)), argues that reason and will must inform our emotions:

[M]oral virtue is a state of character concerned with choice, and choice is a deliberate desire, therefore both the reasoning must be true and the desire right, if the choice is to be good, and the latter must pursue just what the former asserts.

The intellectual virtues, as stated here, simply procure the capacity to realise the good. Aristotle believed that we need to work on ourselves to improve ourselves. He (*Ethics*, II, 6) believed that the moral life is found in ‘the just means’:

Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean i. e., the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it.

Bad behaviour is therefore an excess or defect – for example, eating too much or too little – while virtue consists in acting the right measure. There is a degree of ambiguity in saying that a person is what they choose to act upon. Aristotle was aware of this, recognising that it is possible to perform just acts and yet not be a just person. Importantly, he gave emphasis to an accountability and acceptance for one’s choice and direction in life that Thomas endorsed and that we will discuss in more detail later.

Aristotelian–Christian comparisons

Despite the limitations in Aristotle’s thought, there are similarities and continuities with Christian thinking on character virtues. Points of convergence for Aristotelian and Christian thinking on education might include the following claims, many of which have common-sense appeal. First, the ethics of character formation concerns the nature and purpose of human action, and human flourishing is an appropriate end of education. Humans are physical, social, rational and emotional beings distinct from other animals and therefore have a function, a purpose in a life

lived by reason, which includes goals outside of the confines of self. As Kenny (1998: 68) notes: 'it is the worthwhileness of this end of an action which makes the actions leading to it themselves worthwhile'. Purpose, educational activity and goodness are connected. Second, the role of human agency is central to the formation of character, and therefore a person of character freely deliberates and discerns with a purpose in mind. The will has a place in human agency that is linked to practising the virtues, although in the fully virtuous person conscious acts of will are no longer required, as virtue has acquired an effortless fluency.

Third, virtues are qualities of excellence, sources of strength and energy, settled dispositions and habits, and represent a human being's capacity to act and think well in order to produce good works. Virtues are not innate, but must be acquired by practice, and they shape character. Virtues can be caught, taught and sought. Fourth, we can know the good by seeing it exercised in others, and the good is that towards which all things tend. There is a connection between living virtuously and being happy, and we need a certain degree of experience or maturity in life to successfully develop good character. You cannot be happy without being good, and the virtues are fundamental to educating for the good. Fifth, good character requires practical wisdom as the integrating virtue since it allows us to judge rightly what a situation demands from us so that we can act. You cannot be wise without moral excellence. Finally, we are shaped by profound forces; biology, social environment, history and the virtues are socially formed. A state is a society of humans sharing a common perception of what is good and just, and its purpose is to provide a good and happy life for its citizens (see Kenny, 1998: 75). It is important therefore that the virtues that are formed in citizens can be viewed as other-regarding as opposed to being overly self-centred. Community and the promotion of the common good are key elements and a realisation that we do not flourish through acquiring wealth or through consumerism. Virtues formed socially help human beings deal with changing contexts and advance the virtue of friendship. All six of these Aristotelian points found their way into a Christian philosophy and theology of character formation.

Thomas recognised that

the perfection of virtue consists chiefly in withdrawing man from undue pleasures, to which above all man is inclined, and especially the young, who are more capable of being trained. Consequently a man needs to receive this training from another, whereby to arrive at the perfection of virtue.

(ST I-II q. 95, a. 1)

Virtue, Thomas taught, ought to be acquired by means of some kind of training, and he agreed with Aristotle that the young are more capable of being trained. Both Aristotle and Thomas define virtue in terms of the life well lived, but Thomas calls this good life or human flourishing *beatitudo*, while Aristotle calls it *eudemonia*. These translate into English as 'happiness', 'bliss', 'fulfilment', 'well-being' and 'flourishing'. Thomas offers a divine, 'non-fragile' happiness. For Aristotle, *eudemonia* is confined to this life, the here and now, and is essentially vulnerable to 'moral luck', while for the

Christian, *beatitudo* has two parts; one life in this world and one beyond, with both parts focused on God as the source and goal of our happiness on earth and in heaven. Imperfect happiness is the happiness all of us can experience on earth (Christian or not), but perfect happiness is only possible through the beatific vision of God that provides the complete happiness for which we long. The ultimate end for the Christian is therefore God, the supreme good, and Thomas argues that we must act voluntarily in entirely human ways to obtain this good. Aristotle divides the virtues into intellectual and moral, while Thomas sees them as intellectual, moral and theological. Both prioritise the virtues differently, but Aristotle's list of virtues appears more chaotic and arbitrary, although the meta-virtue of *phronesis* is meant to add a synthesising order to the chaos. However, Thomas agrees with Aristotle that life lived in accordance with reason is intrinsically happy-making. Both focus not on singular human actions in the moral life, but rather on how the person becomes good or bad. It is easy to think that Aristotle and Thomas agreed on everything; they did not. While Aristotle thought that friendship with others aided character formation, Thomas believed that character formation is primarily aided by a friendship with Christ.

There are clearly limitations and points of departure from Aristotle for Christian thinking on character formation. Aristotle's theory is 'naturalistic' and does not depend on any theological or metaphysical knowledge. His focus is on human nature and other worldly and social realities. Clearly the Christian virtues of faith, hope and love are not considered by Aristotle, while some other definitions of virtues in Aristotle are incompatible with Christianity. The worldliness of Aristotle gives his ethics a pragmatic external sense of goodness and the good life, yet the static nature of Aristotelian categories is limited – it is two-dimensionally fixed on the pattern of the good life. The Christian virtue of love of neighbour requires more than Aristotle provides. As Jean Vanier (2001: 182) points out, 'the possibility always exists for any person to awaken to a life of relationship, however minimal, provided he or she is surrounded by respect and love'. Aristotle would not have agreed, given his early-years determinism that emphasises how virtues are acquired through good upbringing only, rather than any subsequent *epiphanic* awakenings. Virtues are not solely a product of human agency for the Christian, and Aristotle had little time for the virtues of humility and compassion, and the desire for justice on behalf of the poor is completely lacking. While *Eleos* (compassion) is a fundamental virtue in Aristotle, it is limited to pain at other's undeserved suffering. He thought that pity for those that deserved their suffering was a vice. His understanding of the virtue of compassion is more circumscribed than in Christianity. In Christian thought every student has the same and infinite value irrespective of background whereas for Aristotle social hierarchy was important. Aristotle also valued human life on the basis of intellectual capacity alone, and his philosophy implies that only those who are autonomous are worthy of happiness. For the Christian, Aristotle's virtues fail to direct you to the highest goods since Aristotle places greater stress on self-sufficiency whereas Christianity does not. Self-improvement and self-mastery lead to

the cult of self-development and express a false pride. In a Christian understanding, virtue is dependent on God for full acquisition.

In Aristotle, education is reduced to the ethical, and morality is understood only from the philosophical perspective. Character in a Christian sense is more than a moral compass focused on a life of human virtues and earthly flourishing. A Christian ethics is premised on a notion of a true human nature with a determinate human good, end or *telos*. Many who follow Aristotle's scheme of ethics reduce Christianity to ethics – a way of living in this world, not for the next, and so Aristotle's idea of teleology/human nature is deployed to resist any subordination to a higher end. However, Aristotle's ideas about human flourishing were not wrong, they were just incomplete. The Holy See's International Theological Commission (2009) published a paper entitled 'In Search of a Universal Ethic', which recognises that, in an era where pluralism reigns, it is not surprising 'that one witnesses today a new blossoming of *virtue ethics* inspired by the Aristotelian tradition'. This Thomist-inspired paper appeals to personal responsibility and individual decision-making, arguing that to seek to be free from responsibility is to cease to be free. It is also worth reminding ourselves that Hauerwas rejects the idea of moral character or the moral life represented as a series of decisions resulting from facing a series of dilemmas, as he says: 'Decision is not king' (1986: 29), and 'The moral life does not consist in making one right decision after another' (1986: 44). He believed that such thought promoted discontinuity in the moral life since decision-making ultimately depends on the narrative of the Christian community.

It is also important for Kotva (1996: 91) to remind us that we are composed of body and spirit, and that if we emphasise the body then we develop a mechanistic vision of the person, whereas if we overemphasise the spirit, then we develop the idea that we are totally free of constraints. If, in contrast, we view them in balance with each other, we naturally see both limits and freedoms. This is because the body symbolises our solidarity with the rest of creation and the ways it shapes us and the spirit symbolises that we are transcendent beings who act and share in relationships. Freedom allows us to choose and self-form to develop our character, but there is also grace, which frees us for a certain kind of life – one that exhibits service, love, peace, patience, kindness and self-control. It is often said in Catholic circles that 'freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought'. We could argue that we are only free and exercise our free will when we know the end for which we act. Hancock (2005: 46) usefully characterises the issues explored in this chapter when he states:

The Church Fathers recognized that we could put Christian philosophy in the service of faith, all in the spirit of ... 'faith seeking understanding'. Philosophy could assist in 1) interpreting Scripture, 2) explicating articles of faith, and 3) defending the Christian faith against those who condemn it as superstitious. Philosophy's power to provide assistance has repeatedly proved itself over the centuries, culminating in the thirteenth century in a theological synthesis ... whose greatest representative was St. Thomas Aquinas.

Thomas joins Augustine and the Church Fathers with the legacy of Aristotle. It is therefore to Thomas that we now turn, fully recognising the many issues involved in developing his thought in education, particularly those concerned with understanding his method of presentation, his terminology, and the historical setting and context of his writings.

Christian anthropology and character

In a broad sense, anthropology involves the study of human beings, and if we want to educate for character through the acquisition of the virtues, we need to understand the concept of character virtues as well as the nature of the human person. This includes both the social and narrative roles of being human – who we are individually and collectively. For the purposes of this text, it means developing a realistic model of the human person – seeing moral agents in terms of their character – entailing the capacity to choose between options and being able to do what they choose. Ultimately, a Christian anthropology is about discovering the meaning and importance of three basic Christian assertions: the human being is an image of God; Christ died for the redemption of humanity; the human being is called to a supernatural destiny of communion with God in heaven. As Gula (2003: 24) aptly notes: ‘In a nutshell, morality is about what we should do because of who we are.’ The use of Christian or Catholic anthropology as used in this text is not meant to be taken as asserting *the* definitive Catholic approach, but rather as one application of Catholic faith to understanding character and virtues.

Brugger (2009: 5) outlines the main tenets of a Catholic anthropology in developing a framework for understanding psychology that can be used as a lens for considering character virtues in education. His model of the human person is based on the Aristotelian-Thomist tradition, which he says is useful for thinking about character virtues and their role in human flourishing. He helpfully describes the human person as: (a) bodily, (b) rational, (c) volitional, (d) relational, (e) substantially one, (f) created by God in his image, (g) weakened by sin and (h) invited to become a member of the body of Christ through baptism. These eight domains are interrelated, and, accordingly, whilst he categorises the first five as philosophical anthropology and the final three as theological anthropology, he emphasises that the theological cannot be omitted from the first four entirely. His description rests on several points. First, human beings are complex biological organisms divided into two sexes: male and female. Second, human beings have the capacity to think and are open to knowing reality and to make some order of it in their minds. We are therefore more than simply bodily beings. Third, what he calls volitional relates to our free practical deliberation, judgements, choices and it is within this domain that we shape our moral character. As he says (2009: 9):

So when we refer to ‘character’ our reference is to those dimensions of the self that are subject to alteration as a result of deliberate human action; said

another way, character is the set of enduring dispositions of mind, will, and affect as shaped by our morally good and bad choices. Although many things in life are beyond one's control, reflexive character is not one of them. One's character is one's own doing, one builds it up or tears it down one choice at a time.

Fourth, relationships matter since we must be in relationship to be human. This relational domain requires the actions in the domains of reason and volition. It emphasises that these relationships within the community to which we belong are character forming because we have an appropriate dependence on others that leads to our interdependence. Through a Christian lens we are created not only to be in relationship with God, but we are also created for community; to be in relationship, mutual love, concern and respect for one another. Fifth, classical philosophy teaches that we are composed and united as body and soul. The physical body and nonphysical soul are interconnected and not separate. It is the soul that animates the body, the body being mortal and the soul immortal, and this domain leads us onto to a Christian unified conception of the human person.

The three theological domains are illuminated by the Christian faith, and they concern human beings as created, fallen and redeemed. First, every human being is created in the image and likeness of God and therefore possesses a unique dignity deserving of respect. Second, sin causes alienation from God in every human being and a certain disorder at the level of human existence that gives us the realisation that we cannot reach perfection in this life. It is sin that disrupts our relationships with one another. Third, sin can be overcome, as well as our alienation from God, through Jesus, who invites us into a relationship with God. The ability to act virtuously comes through grace, but not without effort or our participation. While we are still weakened by sin, we can be assisted and even healed by God's grace. In other words, we can potentially become holy and restore our friendship with God. Thomas defines grace as 'a light of the soul ... when a man is said to have the grace of God, there is signified something bestowed on man by God' (ST I-II, q. 110, a. 1). Grace is therefore supernatural and is greater than what human nature can accomplish by itself. The grace of God transforms a person enabling them to be good and to do the good. It moves and enables the will, enlightens and guides the intellect, so that a person may choose and enact the good. The grace of God is essential to living the moral life for the Christian.

However, we can have no preconceived blueprint of what a person ought to be, since to attempt virtue is a lifelong quest – a journey towards a notion of wholeness in which we are never completed. Because of the great diversity of visions of the good life that are embraced by people, we need a theologically informed Christian vision of character and virtues that we can explain and defend. Christian ethics in this sense is really a critical and constructive reflection on moral existence from the perspective of the Christian faith in which we articulate the moral meaning of Christian convictions. Although the vision of the good can never therefore be fixed in advance in any particular education (as students must

be free to seek it), this does not mean that a school has to offer a thousand choices for building character. Because we are creatures composed of body and soul and made in the image and likeness of God, where God is the exemplar and humans the image, Christian education intends to make us more human by sharing in the divine life – to better us – to know the good, love the good, and to do the good. For the Christian it is not enough to simply know the good, one has to be committed to it. Therefore, when we do Christian ethics, we are doing so with a particular understanding of God, of humanity, and of the world. The different ways of looking at Christian ethics makes it complex.

Our character virtues are never simply inherited, nor do they grow on their own – they have to be formed and cultivated in communities because there are ‘no persons of virtue without formed communities, no formed communities without persons of virtue’ (Boland, 2007: 185). While we become a certain kind of person through our choices and actions, we also acquire the character virtues in the company of others because community is non-negotiable when it comes to our formation, since we cannot realise our potential in isolation. However, character is something that constitutes us as unique individuals – as the inner form that makes us what we are. It is our essential core, our inner reality and what we do consistently in life. It is therefore more than a collection of occasional behaviours or a set of good intentions – it is a way of being. There is circularity in this approach as character determines human action, just as human action determines character – ‘no persons of virtue without formed communities, no formed communities without persons of virtue’ (Boland, 2007: 185).

Pinckaers (2001: 115) defines virtue as ‘a quality of heart and mind, of reason and will that disposes a person to engage in acts and works of excellence, perfect in their composition’. Virtues influence how we describe what we do, what we think we are doing, and what we think is important. The virtues shape not only one’s character, but the world we see and inhabit – they determine who we are. Our character arises out of the practice of these virtues and through education helps students grow in their humanity to become good, wise and just – to flourish in life. To have virtue is to have the power, capacity and ability to achieve something. Ultimately, Christian virtue is not what humans achieve, but is rather what God enables to grow within us. Pinckaers (2005: 15) develops a virtue-orientated morality rooted in the moral theory of Thomas in which ‘the virtues form an organism whose head is constituted by theological virtues. These animate and inspire the moral virtues from within, to such an extent that they transform the measure of the moral virtues’. It is important to state that Pinckaers is central to any consideration of Christian virtues as his influential book, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, ‘sets the trajectory for at least a generation of Catholic moral theologians, a trajectory in which virtue plays a major role’ (see Coutier and Mattison, 2014: 238 and Titus, 2012).

A virtue approach to the moral life will emphasise virtues and the role of the agent and their character in moral decision-making and evaluation. It understands moral virtues as virtues of character and that having a good character is necessary to

be moral. A virtue is therefore an excellence of character, and so in order to be a good person we must develop our character in the right way. We must be taught to practise actions in a virtuous manner, so that our actions over time will form our character. Our character is formed by what virtues we possess, and character itself has a developing quality about it. It is also the case that the things we do and the things that happen to us forms our character and hence our future actions, which are important because they display our values and commitments. Those who model the virtues are our teachers as they help us understand virtue, help us to describe virtue, and even help us to define virtue in practice. Above all, it is important to realise 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. Becoming in this sense means being in transit, moving from one condition in life to another. We need to identify these character virtues to set ourselves personal goals, but these virtues are not simply what we acquire in life, they are what we pursue. We are not born with a set of character virtues; we acquire them through a long process that includes formal education. At first sight this appears individualistic, but we come into existence embedded in a family and a society which may – or may not – form us well as we gradually come to ‘own’ our ‘life story’ and become able to act according to and with what ‘nature’ and ‘nurture’ have given.

Suggested reading

Hadot. P. (1995) *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Oxford: Blackwell.

This book illustrates how philosophy can be seen as a way of seeing and being in the world.

Hauerwas, S. (1985) *Character and the Christian Life*, Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press.

An excellent examination of how our moral life is not composed of beliefs plus decisions; our moral life is the process in which our convictions form our character to be truthful.

Spohn, W. C. (1992) The Return of Virtue Ethics, *Theological Studies*, 53: 1, 60–75.

A look at how virtue ethics has become more prominent in moral theology.

Miller. J. (2012) *The Reception of Aristotle's Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

An exploration of how Aristotle's ethics have been variously received in different historical periods.

Varnier, J. (2001) *Made for Happiness: Discovering the Meaning of Life with Aristotle*, London: Darton Longman Todd.

An interesting insight into Aristotle's ethics from a Christian perspective.

Veatch, H. (2003) *Rational Man: A Modern Interpretation of Aristotelian Ethics*, Carmel, IN: Liberty Fund.

Written originally in 1970, this new version is a popular presentation of Aristotelian ethics for the intelligent layperson.

Vitz, P. C., Nordling, W.J., and Titus, C.S. (eds.) (2020) *A Catholic Christian Meta-Model of the Person: Integration with Psychology and Mental Health Practice*, Sterling, VA: Divine Mercy University Press.

This work draws from Aristotle and Aquinas, conceptualising a Catholic Christian framework for application in mental health practice, as well as in education and personal formation.

Questions

What is your idea of the educated person?

Can an ethics built on a Greek foundation be Christian?

Why do people not necessarily become more virtuous with age?

What are the limits of reason?

What is your understanding of how virtues develop in people?

How could a Christian education be considered broader than an instrumental one?

What does Christianity add to an Aristotelian understanding of virtue?

What are the similarities and differences between a Thomist understanding of virtue and an Aristotelian understanding?

How does Thomas build on and depart from an Augustinian understanding of virtue?

Aristotle recognises different understandings of happiness. Do you recognise these understandings in society today? How do they differ from a Christian understanding?

What is the role of habits in virtue development?

How does an understanding of body and spirit affect the idea of virtue?