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# On the prospects for Aristotelian character education

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**ABSTRACT**

The prospects for Aristotelian character education (ACE) is considered. Seven important claims that should win wide acceptance are reviewed; and also two challenges that are impediments. I argue many of the assumptions of ACE turn out not to be distinctive. The conflation of realism and naturalism is ill-considered, and the account of *phronesis* will need additional clarification to be helpful to educators, as will the specific recommendations on offer. I conclude with a suggestion that Dewey offers a powerful, empirically grounded, educationally accessible account of moral functioning that meets the desiderata of ACE; and that charting an integrative perspective is an exciting prospect for the future.

**KEYWORDS**

Aristotle; character education; Dewey

## Introduction

There was a time when advocacy for moral or character education found partisans on either side of a vast ideological chasm. At least in the American context, moral and character educators ascribed to different ethical traditions, psychological paradigms, curricular objectives and pedagogical preferences (Lapsley & Yeager, 2013). Each camp has its own journal and professional society. Whether one was a moral or character educator seemed to map the terrain in the culture wars and align with political preferences. Moreover, the very popularity of character education, and anxiety over its apparent absence in schools and fervor for its return, seemed to wax and wane over the course of American history (McClellan, 1999). Cunningham (2005) suggested that rise of character education was linked to periods of rapid socio-cultural and economic change but that its fall was inevitable unless yoked to defensible foundations in developmental and educational science.

Fortunately, there is much less contention over ideological concerns in the present context of moral-character education. There is consensus, for example, that moral-character education is immanent to education and inevitable even if remanded to the hidden curriculum (and has never been eliminated from American schools). There is consensus that both virtuous dispositions and the quality of moral deliberation are desirable outcomes and targets of character education. There is consensus that pedagogical content knowledge specific to moral formation requires a blend of direct and indirect methods; and that constructivist best practice for teaching and learning, the cultivation of caring classrooms, social-emotional skills and character strengths are useful additions to the character educator's toolbox. Indeed,

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one lesson of the last two decades is that moral-character education is multi-form and multidimensional; it takes place at different levels within the ecology of classrooms and schools and implicates the developmental infrastructure of communities. Moral-character education is no simple intervention or single curriculum, there is no silver bullet.

Both the consensus and complication of moral-character education is on display in the eleven principles of character education (Character.org, 2016). According to these principles effective character education takes place in schools where there is explicit and frequent articulation of the language of values; where teaching and learning is driven by constructivist pedagogy and well-attested motivational strategies. Effective character education requires communal organization of schools, relational trust among professional staff and caring classrooms that encourage belonging, bonding and sense of community. There is academic press with respect to rigorous curriculum and opportunities to practice and reflect upon moral dispositions. Moreover, and to Cunningham's (2005) point, each component principle of character education is vouchsafed by an empirical base in the learning, educational and developmental sciences.

Of course consensus does not mean unanimity. There are conceptual and empirical issues to sort out, but these debates are testimony (I contend) to the relevance of the common objective and to the vibrancy of moral psychology research programs. Among others, these issues concern how to understand character and virtues as psychologically defensible constructs (Annas, Narvaez, & Snow, 2016; Sherman, 1989; Snow, 2010) and the proper relation of virtue ethics to moral-character education (Carr & Steutel, 1999; Chen, 2013; Fowers, 2005; Steutal, 1997). There is ongoing reflection on moral personality (Flanagan, 1991, 2009; Hill & Roberts, 2010; Lapsley & Hill, 2009), character strengths and the empirical structure of virtue (Kristjansson, 2013; Macdonald, Bore & Munro, 2008; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Shryack, Steger, Krueger & Kallie, 2010). Intellectual virtues are increasingly the target of inquiry and practice (Baehr, 2016, 2011; Dow, 2013; Roberts & Wood, 2009). The dismissal of global traits by situationists (e.g., Doris, 2002) has summoned reflection on the nature of dispositions and the defense of character education (Fleeson, Furr, Jayawickreme, Meindl, & Helzer, 2014; Kamtekar, 2004; Miller, 2013; Lapsley, in press; Sreenivasan, 2002, in press). The moral work of teaching, the character of teachers and what is required of teacher education has also attracted notice (Carr, 2007; Lapsley & Woodbury, in press; Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2013).

Clearly, moral-character education (and moral psychology generally) is enjoying a remarkable renaissance. Although the field now seems resplendent with the bloom of many flowers, whether the sight is found pleasing might depend on preference for a particular variety. There is an argument, for example, that the boundary of what constitutes character education has become so expansive, the use of the term so profligate, that we are in danger of losing sight of flowers and wheat for weeds and chaff. Kristjansson (2015) for one, laments that contemporary character education is not on firmer Aristotelian footing and so his book is an attempt to replant the field on richer classical soil with a particular strain in mind.

## *Kristjansson's project*

Kristjansson's (2015) appeal to Aristotelian virtue ethics is not driven (he says) by mere idolatry. For example, there is critical examination of seven problems with what he calls Aristotelian Character Education (ACE). One problem is just public relations—Aristotelians

need to eradicate myths and use less off-putting language to 'get the message out' to educators. Another problem is the lack of objective assessments of moral virtue that do not involve self-reports. A third problem is that early habituation does not lead to the cultivation of *phronesis* in a straightforward way—how is it possible to enter the palace of reason through the courtyard of habit and tradition? Following Peters (1981) this is called the paradox of ACE. Other problems include Aristotle's claim that contemplation is the best life, that bad early upbringing cannot be repaired. There is little said in the Aristotelian corpus about the methodology of proper teaching or about psycho-moral and professional issues concerning the moral educator. Kristjansson (2015) attempts to redress these problems to Aristotle's advantage.

Kristjansson is fond of enumerations. In addition to the aforementioned seven problems he discusses five distinguishing assumptions of ACE, eight themes common to character education, 10 assumptions that illustrate the distinctive appeal of ACE and 10 more persistent myths. He reviews 10 misgivings that psychologists have about character education. Along the way he critiques wisdom approaches to phronesis, Big 5 personality, character strengths assessment, social-emotional learning and the skill analogy of virtue. He has a problem with the professional identity literature, especially narrative conceptions of identity and 'post-modern' conceptions of the emotional practice of teachers. The discussion of these issues is engaging and helpful; and marked by a welcome, persistent search for common ground, the sensible compromise, the middle way. This book will be studied with profit for some time to come. In the spirit of the book I would like to enumerate seven valuable points that Kristjansson makes about character education, although they do not always redound to the benefit of ACE; then two more fundamental problems with the ACE project that give me pause about its prospects.

## *Seven important claims*

Although the golden mean structure of virtue attributed to Aristotelian virtue ethics is not the unalloyed strong suit he claims, it is still helpful to hear that there is nothing inherently wrong with open-ended lists of virtues so long as one can show that 'a distinct sphere of human existence can be carved out where a given state of character constitutes living well within it, that state of character is a moral virtue' (p. 28). This should temper the oft-cited 'bag of virtues' criticism that the Kohlberg team has raised with some forms of character education.

Kristjansson credits Aristotle for keeping the emotions central to character formation. A virtue specifies proper passions, desires and pleasures but these are fused with a critical rationality, so there can be no division of rationality and emotions in Aristotelian virtue psychology. Of course, the dynamic role of emotions in personality and cognitive development is well-established (e.g., Bugental & Goodnow, 1998; Cummings, Braungart-Rieker, & Rocher Schudlich, 2013); and social cognitive theory understand personality as a unified cognitive-affective system (e.g., Mischel & Shoda, 1995), so crediting Aristotle for the insight would not occur to psychologists.

But Kristjansson's key point, I think, is not so much that cognition and emotions are tightly bound but that there is second-order reflection on the appropriateness of emotions, desires, traits and states of character. Here is where Aristotle's account of *phronesis* as an intellectual virtue is foundational to ACE. *Phronesis* is a meta-virtue that monitors how

things are going; it guides the moral virtues, re-evaluates dispositions, sorts out the relative weight of competing values. He writes 'A person who has acquired *phronesis* has thus, *inter alia,* the wisdom to adjudicate the relative weight of different virtues in conflict situations and to reach a measured verdict about best courses of action' (p. 88) and not just in local circumscribed domains but about life in general. A life of virtue conduces to human flourishing and we cannot be fully good without *phronesis*.

I will say more about *phronesis* below but the notion that virtuous individuals make judgments about the desirability of desires and traits of character, and align the self with morality, strikes me as exactly right. So is Kristjansson's concern to orient the task of ACE to the cultivation of the moral self who reflectively works out the blueprint for living well the life that is good for one to live, which is to say, the life of *eudaimonia*. A social cognitive perspective on moral personality also insists that the moral self is the proper aim of intentional character education (Lapsley & Stey, 2014; Lapsley & Woodbury, in press), although its philosophical source is not Aristotelian *phronesis* but Frankfurt's (1971, 1992) concept of a person and Taylor's (1989) related notion of strong evaluation. The strong evaluation (Taylor) of the moral person (Frankfurt) makes ethical assessments of first-order desires; makes judgements about what is worthy and unworthy, about what is significant and decent and on this basis conforms behavior accordingly (as second-order volitions). In my view this perspective on the moral self has proven more useful for guiding contemporary character education and moral psychology than has ritualistic invocation of Aristotle's *phronesis*, but perhaps the similarity among these formulations attest to a common intellectual heritage for which Aristotle is due credit.

Aristotle's naturalism appeals to Kristjansson and he counts it is as a distinguishing assumption of Aristotle's virtue ethics that ethical theory should answer to evidence. He writes

> 'Like all naturalisms, Aristotle's is based on the assumption that we live in a single unified world of human experience where so called *moral* properties are exclusively *natural* properties and hence in principle at least, are *empirically* defeasible' (p. 24, emphasis in original).

I agree completely with this assertion. In fact, ethical naturalism is the starting point of interdisciplinary dialogue across the 'mending wall' of ethics and psychology (Lapsley, in press), and while it is doubtful that Aristotle should get the credit (one could just as well credit Hume, for example; or Dewey, or any number of contemporary philosophers), it is clear that there can be no credible character education without well-attested, empirical specification of core notions such as virtues, traits, dispositions and character.

Kristjansson helpfully repairs Aristotle's pessimistic claim that children subjected to bad upbringing cannot be made right. This too is welcome, but it underscores what is already well-known in developmental science that there is little cause to give up on kids. It just seems odd that Kristjansson took Aristotle's strictures seriously enough to bother repairing it. Rather than a close reading of what *phronesis* could mean in this case, most educators and parents will turn to empirically attested literatures of developmental psychopathology, to the literatures on risk-and-resilience or on developmental optimization (e.g., Narvaez & Gleason, 2013) to understand the consequences of various kinds of upbringing and what to do if it goes wrong. Kristjansson wants to credit Aristotle for advocating the importance of exposing children to exemplar teachers and having open dialogue, of reading good literature—there is nothing objectionable about these practices, of course, although

few would find even a reconstructed interpretation of *phronesis* the first place to look for these recommendations.

Kristjansson makes a reasonable case against the situationist critique of broad character traits. He writes

> Typically, situationists deliberately choose to focus on situations that are not only *broad* but *passive* (the agent is a victim rather than the creator of the situation), *extraordinary* (the situations present features that the person never experienced before and is never ever likely to experience again) and/or involve *strong* social expectations of compliance. (p. 58, emphasis in original).

It is right to insist that this debate take up the nature of situations. Indeed, in a recent study Judge and Zapata (2015) demonstrated that trait activation is conditional and responsive to the strength of situations (e.g., Big 5 traits were predictive of job performance but only under conditions of 'weak situations,' for example, the workplace was unstructured, employees had wide discretion). This underscores the importance of looking for stable dispositional signatures at the intersection of person x context interactions (Shoda & Mischel, 2000), although this lesson of social cognitive theory is not much improved by waving a hand at Aristotle.

Finally, Kristjansson makes a valuable contribution to the discourse concerning the moral formation of educators. In his view the ideally good teacher is a person of a certain kind. The teacher of morality should be a moral teacher. The good teacher is in trait possession of the virtues. He writes 'the teacher as a character educator can only be understood in the broader context of the teacher as a person with a certain moral character' (p. 135). Moreover, many teachers feel ill-equipped to take up their responsibilities as moral educators or lack the requisite language to articulate the moral dimensions of their craft and mission and here is where Aristotelian virtue theory can be useful. Kristjansson is probably right about that. The struggle to fold moral-character education into teacher training is real (Lapsley & Woodbury, in press), and Kristjansson is correct when he notes that 'A lot depends on the ethos of individual schools' (p. 130) for influencing the manner and scope of proper induction into the moral craft of teaching and the moral formation of educators. Indeed, the communitarian features of schools, its climate and culture, the degree to which it fosters a sense of caring and belonging, is an indispensable component of character education.

## *Two important challenges*

As noted earlier Kristjansson's embrace of Aristotle's naturalism is an attractive feature of his ACE project insofar as it makes possible mutually informing dialogue with the empirical sciences. The commitment to naturalism opens the lines of communication between psychologists who want to get their ethics right and philosophers who want to get their facts straight; and the joint consideration of empirically responsible ethical theory and philosophically responsible moral psychology should redound to the benefit of effective moral-character education.

### *Realism and anti-realism*

But what is not helpful is Kristjansson's conflation of ethical naturalism with moral realism. I will leave it to exegetes to determine if Aristotle was the realist that Kristjansson makes him out to be, but a commitment to naturalism, in any of its many forms, does not entail a stance on the realism-anti-realism debate. As Clayton (2006, p. 446) put it, 'The important

thing is that moral claims can be rationally supported, not that all the constituents of such claims refer or fail to refer to "real" things.'

Kristjansson's stance on realism leads him to assert, for example, that there is a real self-character that exists 'deep down' that is independent of identity and not the same as self-concept; and is inaccessible to self-report assessment. He is opposed to symbolic interactionist accounts of the self but argues instead that Aristotle's realist self consists of 'a set of objective, identity conferring traits, partly genetic, partly shaped in early childhood—that the agent brings to the table, a self that can be distinguished from mere attributed self-concept' (pp. 124–125). Indeed, no self-report method passes muster on Kristjansson's naturalist-realist conception of virtue, making virtue measurement the 'profoundest problem' (p. 83) facing ACE. Kristjansson wants to devise a triangulation assessment strategy that avoids 'metric arbitrariness' but gets under the skin, as it were, to reveal the true, realist moral self.

The psychological self is a notoriously complicated construct and there is more to it than the self-concept, to be sure (e.g., Harter, 2012; Kegan, 1982). There is also truth to the assertion that selfhood consists of identity-conferring traits 'partly shaped in childhood.' But to insist on a self that is adhesive 'all the way down' that is also impervious to social construction is simply at variance with modern psychology. There is never a time when the self is a solitary, individual achievement. We need the participation of others to construct a sense of self because we are fundamentally a social species. What's more, it is retrograde, indeed, almost *positivistic*, to ignore first-person reports of one's own subjectivity in assessment of self-constructs. We will never get away from trying to understand persons from the inside-out; and subjects' own construal of their person, vocation and life projects, for all the challenges to interpretation, will be crucial to virtue assessment.

Moreover, self-understanding develops, changes, and co-evolves with changing relational contexts; and the 'partly shaping' of the self is a feature of every phase of the life-course and not simply a product of early childhood. The self is fundamentally social and developmental. We are never done with the self-project. Emerging adulthood, for example, is marked by a re-sorting of identity-conferring traits (Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006) and by construction of identity-conferring narratives (McAdams, 2015) that give meaning and purpose to the sense of self. Indeed, the authorial turn in the construction of autobiographical narratives that frame self-identity is the art of personality development, as McAdams (2015) puts it.

Kristjansson is not going to like this very much because he is opposed to narrative identity for its apparent post-modern anti-realism. But two observations are in order. First, the narrative approach to personality and identity in fact provides what Kristjansson says he wants, which is a way of talking about *phronesis* as a life plan, a way of understanding one's life project, one's blueprint. This is what a narrative understanding of the self provides, and in a far richer, more empirically-grounded way than vague references to *phronesis*. Second, if Kristjansson is prepared to jettison wide swaths of personality psychology to rescue a realist conception of self then he cannot expect ACE to generate much interest on the empirical side of the mending wall.

But I do not think Kristjansson is wading into self-ontology just to pass along shopworn methodological cautions about self-reports. Indeed, any assessment that passes Aristotelian muster will have its own interpretive shortcomings to worry about. Rather, Kristjansson's 'serious exception' to 'anti-realist epistemological constructivism' (p. 131), to anti-realist socially-constructed selves and 'post-modern approaches to teacher emotion' (p. 137) has at

its source a concern to anchor Aristotelian character to objective foundations, to something really there, to objective moral facts that stands apart from narrative identities, looking-glass selves and mere self-concept. Kristjansson seems worried about post-modern tendencies and so insists upon a realist ontology to secure a foundation for ACE.

But there are no foundations. There is no way to talk about the concepts under discussion, such as trait, virtue, self, character, except as theoretical constructs, but there is no infallible empirical base to adjudicate contention among fallible theories. There is no real self out there that stands apart from theoretical conceptions of self (including the self-theory we hold about ourselves). There are no incorrigible hard facts 'really there' untouched by corrigible theory. Observations do not become factual outside the texture of theoretical frameworks that give them significance. Everything we know scientifically (and I would add, philosophically) about the world is filtered through rich networks of fallible theoretical constructs held together by paradigmatic tradition. As Lakatos (1978a), p. 16) put it, 'all propositions of science are theoretical and incurably fallible.' Science has long ago made its peace with fallibilism, and for this reason is not much interested in the preoccupations of ontologists; is not much interested in foundations. Trying to find the realist and foundational moral self, on this account, will be like searching in a dark closet for a black cat that isn't there.

I noted that the work of scientific disciplines is marked by multiple contending paradigms. There are rival ethical traditions, too, as MacIntyre (1984, 1988) has noted. But there is nothing post-modern about this. There is nothing about paradigms and traditions that should leave us anxiously yearning for realist foundations. There is no cause for skepticism. We are not helpless in passing critical judgment on ideas, concepts, theories and traditions, but the unit of analysis shifts from tests of individual experiments (for example) to how research programs (or ethical traditions) as a whole fare. Consequently, there is no instant rationality in science, no such thing as critical experiments. No single adverse finding, critique or putative refutation settles the matter. All theories swim against the tide of anomaly and prima facie refutation, or, as Lakatos (1978b, p.5) colorfully put it, 'all theories are born refuted and die refuted.'

But the progressive character of research programs (or ethical traditions) cannot be judged in isolation of historical considerations but only on the growth of knowledge that it represents in comparison with rivals (Lakatos, 1978a). Scientific rationality depends upon progressive problem shifts that can be determined only after comparative-historical appraisal. Hence over time some research programs are judged to be progressive if they show growth in knowledge; if they digest anomaly and anticipate novel facts, some of which are corroborated. Research programs are degenerating if they become larded with ad hoc stratagems that are purely defensive but are not content-increasing.[1] Time will tell, of course, but the present appeal to ACE does not yet have the markings of a progressive research program. Many of the distinguishing assumptions that Kristjansson holds out for ACE are better explained by other constructs or by other theoretical traditions; and what is held out as distinctly Aristotelian instructional practices turns out to be unobjectionable but commonplace. As a result, trying to launch a variety of character education that is distinctly Aristotelian is going to be a heavy lift.

### *Whither phronesis*

The second challenge concerns *phronesis,* which is an important and distinctive feature of Aristotle's virtue theory. Kristjansson is keen to show that *phronesis* does not involve 'some

sort of mysterious intuitive artistry' (p. 87). Yet it is hard to get a handle on it as a psychological construct, at least on Kristjansson's account. *Phronesis* is an intellectual virtue that 'latches itself' to every other virtue and 'infuses it with reason' (p. 112). It is a meta-virtue that guides all the others. It weighs, monitors, judges, decides. Although *phronesis* appears to be a developmental accomplishment, Kristjansson insists that we stick with Aristotle's claim that early habituation is non-rational. Indeed, helpful reconstructions of *phronesis* (e.g., Sherman, 1989) are judged to be 'overly optimistic' because it would 'intellectualize' early habituation (p. 91).

Moreover, Kristjansson is not happy with positive psychology's take on wisdom because it does not treat it like a meta-virtue but as one among many. He is not happy with the Berlin Model of wisdom (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000) or Sternberg's (1998) balance model because these models are too broad and do not sufficiently distinguish *phronesis* from *sophia* (and the Berlin Model might impermissibly countenance relativism, as if this should matter to an empirical theory). The skill analogy (e.g., Annas, 2011) is rejected because it confuses *phronesis* with *techne*; and because skill-development is domain specific but *phronesis* is concerned with 'harmonious mastery of one's whole life' (p. 97). Consequently, '*phronesis* requires access to a systematic understanding of the good life' (p. 100) that provides a blueprint to guide the decisions a person makes.

*Phronesis* comes off in this account as an elusive concept hard to pin down. It latches on to things, it infuses with reason, it guides but requires access to understanding; it underwrites life plans. It develops but we can't say how. It seems at home in a faculty psychology if such a thing was credible. Whether an intellectual process is judged to be *techne, sophia* or *phronesis* is of no concern to empirical science and it is not a criticism of psychological theory that its categories do not align with Aristotle's. Similarly, the division of virtues into intellectual or moral is an entirely philosophical matter (but the distinction has its doubters, e.g., Roberts & Wood, 2009); as is the existence of the 'fully virtuous person' (a notion that would scarcely pass the test of psychological credibility). The life-plan-blueprint aspect of *phronesis* is not an improvement over narrative self-identity constructions of the moral self.

Unfortunately, the respect for evidential naturalism that Kristjansson claims for ACE tends to conform the empirical literatures to philosophical objectives rather than the other way 'round. Take the matter of early habituation. Kristjansson insists that early moral formation should not be intellectualized because Aristotle described early habituation as non-rational. This ignores, for the sake of a dogmatic reading of Aristotle, the vast corpus of developmental science that documents a robust suite of social-cognitive capacities that come online in early development, sometimes in infancy (e.g., Narvaez, 2010, 2014). It ignores, for the sake of a strict reading of Aristotle's barren account of habituation, the educational science literatures on the scaffolded and relational aspects of teaching and learning. As a result, because these literatures are not consulted, we have to pretend that there is a moral education paradox.

Similarly, Kristjansson thinks there is 'something decidedly odd, from an Aristotelian perspective, about the idea of domain-specific phronesis that is not founded on general phronesis' (p. 99). But whether something that is empirically demonstrable is deemed odd from an Aristotelian perspective is of little moment. The movement from specific-to-general is the only way things happens from a developmental and cognitive learning point of view. This is how expertise and critical discernment develops. Kristjansson shifts this argument away from a discussion about development (after affirming that *phronesis* is fundamentally

a developmental matter) to one of professional education, which changes the subject. So instead he wants to argue that judgments by nurses (for example) that are driven by 'nursing *techne*' must be grounded on a general phronesis. This is far from obvious but misses the point about the movement in child development from specific to general learning, from simplicity to complexity, from lack of differentiation to hierarchical integration.

Kristjansson wants to argue that *phronesis* is a matter of getting life's blueprint in order, as opposed to *techne's* concern about domain-specific skills. This parsing of blueprint vs skill also seems like a small matter. Of course we teach the particular in the context and reference to the general. This is just good education. How this works was demonstrated recently by Yeager et al. (2014) who showed that framing even mundane and boring academic tasks in terms of larger self-transcendent goals had a salutary influence on self-regulation. Similarly, when teachers frame learning objectives with a rationale that refers to intrinsic goals, students are more likely to internalize the goal and show more self-determination in pursuit of it, particularly in autonomy-supporting (versus controlling) classrooms (Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). In the moral domain Mullen, Turner, and Narvaez (2005) showed that students responded with greater commitment to citizenship, ethical knowledge, moral self-regulation and moral locus of control when classroom events were framed in terms of larger moral considerations.

Clearly how things are framed matter for learning, for self-determination and for the development of the moral self. And surely we teach children the skills of emotional discernment, for example, how to read intentions, how to notice distress or when to apologize and we do this with the intention of helping children develop a more general moral self. But to fuss about what its *techne* and what is *phronesis* is just the sort of parsing and score-keeping that is of interest only to exegetes and specialists. So is a later discussion that Kristjansson takes up about who should get credit, Socrates or Aristotle, for emphasizing the importance of dialogue in education. This would not matter much to the learning sciences. One could just as well invoke Vygotsky or Dewey. For that matter Cicero also contributed to the evolution of the dialogue form for oratorical purposes (see, e.g., *Nature of the Gods*); and the notion of the dialogical self is central to contemporary accounts of moral development (e.g., Day & Tappan, 1996; Haste & Abrahams, 2008).

Finally, it is fair to ask just what character education would look like from an Aristotelian perspective. Although the present book is a prolegomenon to one that promises more details, the outline of what ACE entails is in view. I noted earlier Kristjansson's point about the importance of exposing children to moral exemplars, having them read good literature and engaging them in transformative and edifying dialogue. Kristjansson also recommends that children have character friendships where the friend is loved because of his or her virtue (versus friendship based on utility or pleasure). He does not think much of service learning, so take that off the agenda. With respect to teacher preparation Kristjansson recommends taking care in selection of teacher candidates; of providing opportunities for preservice teachers to engage in critical self-reflection from a moral perspective; and taking courses in the arts and literature. As with many of the distinguishing assumptions reviewed earlier, many of these otherwise salutary recommendations would not include Aristotle as an obvious source.

## Summary and conclusion

What then are the prospects for ACE? This is a learned and engaging book and Kristjansson has significantly advanced the discussion across the mending wall of ethics and psychology with respect to the moral-character education agenda. Indeed, there is something irresistible about the Aristotelian perspective and readers will readily see its attractions. Yet I come away with the worry that educational and developmental psychologists and educators generally, will find the advocacy for ACE strained, more special pleading than convincing, not worth the bother and not an improvement over other trends in the moral-character education literature.

I reviewed four general concerns. First, many of the assumptions of ACE turn out not to be distinctive; or else are handled better by other literatures. Second, the preoccupation with ontology, and the conflation of realism and naturalism, sends ACE off the rail chasing post-modern bogeys. Third, *phronesis* is still an elusive notion that does not clarify the mission of the moral educator. Fourth, the specific recommendations entailed by ACE, at least foreshadowed in the present book, do not seem promising or else do not add up to a coherent, distinctive educational agenda.

Finally, I noted earlier that on Lakatosian grounds the evaluation of research programs or ethical traditions must be an historical-comparative matter. I suggested that ACE does not yet show evidence of being a progressive problem-shift in how we think about moral-character education. But what would be a competitor approach? I might suggest that Dewey offers a promising avenue for conceptualizing moral-character education and for guiding instructional practice. Dewey also embraces ethical naturalism and his many writings already command attention within education. Indeed, Dewey's writings on education present a lower translational hurdle for purposes of instructional practice than do the classical Aristotelian categories.

Moreover, Dewey's work already provides what Kristjansson says he wants, which is an approach to morality that combines deliberative and affective processes and one that takes the lived experience of situations into account. Johnson (2014) shows, for example, how Dewey's ethical naturalism conceives moral deliberation in terms of cognition, imagination and feeling with the goal of forming a moral self. There is an emphasis on 'reflective valuation' and a plausible account of deliberative processes that do not require positing *phronesis* or any other moral faculty but is grounded by literatures in the cognitive sciences (Johnson, 2014). Here sorting out a plan of action is described in terms of dramatic rehearsals or a process of cognitive-conative-affective simulation.

This Deweyan perspective may not provide all that is wanted, and, indeed, it describes moral functioning, deliberation and action without much recourse to the language of virtue. Yet finding a way to power the work of ACE with the insights of Dewey is a promising and exciting prospect for which work has already begun (Narvaez, 2006; Narvaez & Lapsley, 2014).

## Note

1. MacIntyre (1984) was influenced by this Lakatosian framework to account for how rival claims of ethical traditions can be adjudicated (personal communication).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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