There is Something About Aristotle: The Pros and Cons of Aristotelianism in Contemporary Moral Education

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The aim of this article is to pinpoint some of the features that do—or should—make Aristotelianism attractive to current moral educators. At the same time, it also identifies theoretical and practical shortcomings that contemporary Aristotelians have been overly cavalier about. Section II presents a brisk tour of ten of the 'pros': features that are attractive because they accommodate certain powerful and prevailing assumptions in current moral philosophy and moral psychology—applying them to moral education. Section III explores five versions of the view that Aristotle's position is somehow anachronistic and out-dated. As none of those bears scrutiny, Section IV addresses ten features of Aristotelianism that do not seem to sit well with contemporary moral philosophy and psychology: the genuine 'cons' of Aristotelianism. It is subsequently argued that if we want to avoid acquiring Aristotelianism on the cheap, those less attractive features need to be engaged head-on: reinterpreted, revised or simply rejected.

I INTRODUCTION

In many subject-matters, to think correctly is to think like Aristotle; and we are his disciples whether we will or not, even though we may not know it (Newman, 1982 [1873], p. 83).

This article is about the pros and cons of Aristotelianism in contemporary moral education. My aim is to pinpoint some of the features that do—or should—make Aristotelianism attractive to contemporary moral educators. At the same time, I also propose to identify theoretical and practical shortcomings that Aristotelian educationists have been too cavalier about so far. Before turning to the main content of the article, however, it will be instructive to preface it with some historical observations that motivate its writing.

To anyone outside the charmed circle of moral education, and indeed to a number of insiders as well, it will be a mystery why four of the most popular approaches to moral education of late—US-style *character education*, *social and emotional learning* (aka emotional-intelligence theory), communitarian (as distinct from liberal) brands of *citizenship education* and now, most recently, *positive psychology's virtue theory*—all claim to be informed by and seek inspiration from the thoughts of the ancient philosopher Aristotle. To be sure, Aristotle aficionados—the present author included—have criticised all those approaches for unfortunate and unnecessary departures from Aristotle's own programme of moral education: character education for its philosophically crude, nostalgic and overly behaviouristic stance (Kristjánsson, 2006, Chapter 5), social and emotional learning for failing to place substantive moral constraints on the content of emotionally intelligent emotions (Kristjánsson, 2007, Chapter 6), citizenship education for putting the cart before the horse by trying to specify the politically right prior to the morally good (Kristjánsson, 2006, Chapter 5) and positive psychology's virtue theory for its lack of a moral integrator and adjudicator (Kristjánsson, 2013a, Chapter 7).

Those departures notwithstanding, there remains something quintessentially Aristotelian about seeing moral development as a process of learning to exhibit virtues in action (*à la* US-style character education) rather than just sitting pretty on them; about considering proper emotional regulation an intrinsic part of the good life (*à la* social and emotional learning); about considering the creation of certain socio-political mechanisms a necessary precondition for the sustenance of moral education (*à la* citizenship education); and about highlighting un-self-conscious pleasure in unimpeded activity (or what is nowadays known as 'flow') as the icing on the cake of a virtuous life (*à la* positive psychology). It would, in other words, be uncharitable to reject the claim that all four approaches have *some* salient Aristotelian credentials; what they are promulgating cannot be written off wholesale as vulgarised Aristotelianism.

Moreover, recent times have seen a number of eminent moral educators and philosophers who—while not aligning themselves to any of those four approaches—have made a case for the retrieval of less diluted and/or more textually faithful forms of Aristotelianism in contemporary moral education (e.g. Sherman, 1989; Carr, 1991; Steutel, 1997; Curren, 2010; Sanderse, 2012). Tachibana (2012) helpfully divides those scholars into three discrete camps: the *interpreters*, such as Sherman, whose main aim is to make sense of Aristotle's own educational thought and remain predominantly deferential to him; the *applicators*, such as the present author (Kristjánsson, 2007, Chapter 1), who—not considering themselves to be classics scholars—are exclusively concerned with repackaging Aristotle's ideas as food for contemporary educational thought; and the *mediators*, such as Curren, who want to combine Aristotelian exegesis with a contemporary update and resuscitation.

Now, the mystery at stake here is obviously not that a great many scholars think alike. After all, there is a clear overlap between Aristotelian moral theory and that of various other major historical players, such as

Confucius and John Stuart Mill, and it would be more of a mystery if their views on moral education were completely at odds. The 'mystery' that I referred to at the beginning has to do, rather, with (a) the extent to which Aristotle has been singled out recently as an authority on moral education *over and above* a number of other possible philosophical candidates—for example, Plato, Locke, Rousseau, Wollstonecraft, Kant or Dewey—and (b) the extent to which current programmes of moral education are now routinely couched in terms such as 'character', '*hexis*', '*praxis*', '*polis*', '*phronesis*', '*eudaimonia*', 'virtuous emotion' and 'flow'—terms that have a clear Aristotelian ancestry. At the same time, only a moment's thought makes us realise that if we could time-travel 2300 years back to Aristotle's Greece, we would find ourselves in cultural situations so different from ours that we would be all at sea.

The surge of interest in Aristotle as a progenitor of contemporary approaches to moral education (recorded e.g. in Lee and Taylor's helpful content analysis of 40 volumes of the *Journal of Moral Education*, 2013) is not as old as we might think. Before the 1980s, the prevailing view in educational circles was that, regarding creative originality and modern topicality, Aristotle's ideas lagged behind those of, for instance, Plato (see Tachibana, 2012). Although the revival of Aristotelian or quasi-Aristotelian virtue ethics as a leading moral theory in the wake of Elizabeth Anscombe's landmark (1958) article was always bound to redirect attention, sooner or later, to Aristotle's views on moral education, it was not until a seminal article by Myles Burnyeat appeared in 1980 that Aristotle's reputation as a major educational thinker was re-established. Why could it be that so many moral educators have taken a shine to Aristotle in such a brief period of time since this Aristotelian revival started? Here is a sample of some possible explanations.

(a) *The geniality explanation.* According to this explanation, Aristotle was a true genius of moral education to whom we have now, fortunately, turned back for guidance. An early advocate of this explanation was Ayn Rand who—never one to fight shy of superlatives—described Aristotle as the 'philosophical Atlas who carries the whole of Western civilization on its shoulders' and nothing less than 'the cultural barometer of Western history' (Rand, 1963, p. 19). The problem with this explanation is that the idea of academic—as opposed to artistic—geniuses is troublesome. For instance, it is generally acknowledged nowadays that whereas no one else than da Vinci could have painted *Mona Lisa*, if Newton had not written his *Principia Mathematica* someone else would have done within a century or so. Moreover, the geniality explanation does not sit well with the fact that the best way to describe Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is that of a work by a 'safe pair of hands' rather than as a luminous, epigrammatic and startling piece of study written by a genius.

(b) *The common-sense explanation.* Famously, Bertrand Russell claimed that there is 'not a word [in Aristotle] that rises above common sense' (1946, p. 191)—although he obviously did not intend that as a compliment. One way to explain why so many contemporary accounts of moral education are studded with references to Aristotle will be to point out that moral

education is, after all, no rocket science but rather a collection of mundane truths derived from everyday experience. Just as the old quip about pornography, as being such a small kingdom that it can be covered all in a single tour, is on target, it could be argued that the field of moral education is so simple and well specified that it was likely that the first decent philosopher who put his head to it in a rigorous way would uncover most of its truths. Admittedly, theorists have gone on a number of wild goose chases through the centuries—via the legitimating paradigms of the essentially sinful child that needs to be corrected, the insufficiently rational child that needs to learn to equate the moral fully with the rational, and the emotionally vulnerable child whose fractured self-esteem needs to be boosted—but they have now happily returned to the common-sense paradigm of the flourishing child, in Aristotle, where the simple and easily observable truths of the matter lie (cf. Walker, Roberts and Kristjánsson, 2014). Two observations speak against this explanation, however. One is that if moral education is so commonsensical, why have so many theorists got it all wrong (*ex hypothesi* by not heeding Aristotle's message)? And why are shelves in bookstores occupied by biographies of people who suffered bad moral education at the hands of bright parents? The other observation is that even if a lot of moral education is simply about common sense, that common sense is presumably much better grounded empirically today than it was in Aristotle's time. Why should we trust Aristotle's mainly anecdotal evidence when we have over a century of social scientific evidence to draw upon?

(c) *The relativistic explanation*. The idea here is that educational discourse tends to lurch aimlessly from one fad to the other. It is simply an historical coincidence that we have now reached a nostalgic *fin-de-siècle* era where it has become fashionable—conducive to one's symbolic capital as a scholar—to root for Aristotle. This explanation highlights the transitory nature of ideas and assumes that no objectively grounded arguments can be given for one's adherence to Aristotelianism. As I try to show in Section II, however, this is not the case at all. Aristotelianism presents us with a number of distinct features that provide good reasons for being attracted to it (although some of its features are clearly less appealing: see Section IV). I hope to show that the recent interest in 'Aristotle the educator' transcends the enthusiasm for the latest educational fad. In any case, this explanation will only commend itself to postmodernists and others cynical deniers of the idea of academic progress.

(d) *The analogy explanation*. According to this explanation, there are striking analogies between aspects of Greek society in Aristotle's time and our own times. After all, the Athenians had experimented with democracy and were faced with many of the same challenges that we meet with in modern Western democracies, including demagoguery and public disaffection or apathy. The obvious counter-argument here is, however, that while those similarities should not be overlooked, there are sufficiently deep differences between our conceptions of democracy, religion and childhood (to mention only three issues) to offset the explanation that Aristotelianism

is so appealing to us today because of unique similarities in societal conditions and conceptions.

(e) *The ventriloquist's-dummy explanation*. On this explanation, the purported Aristotelian renaissance in moral education is all smoke and mirrors. What is actually being touted has very little, if anything, to do with the true views of the old master; rather people use him as a ventriloquist's dummy to air their own—often thoroughly modern—conceptions. There is a grain of truth in this explanation. First, one does not need to dig deep to find accounts that fail to comply with the basics of Aristotle's philosophy and are, indeed, Aristotelian in nothing but name (some of those are exposed in Kristjánsson, 2007). Second, while there is nothing wrong, from Aristotle's own naturalistic perspective, with updating his views in light of new empirical evidence, there are obviously limits to how far one can depart from the original source and still claim that one's account is 'Aristotelian'. Yet this explanation fails to tell the whole story precisely because considerable efforts are being exercised by contemporary Aristotelians to distance themselves from those who only use Aristotle as a convenient mouthpiece. To use another metaphor, it seems to be possible to separate the Aristotelian wheat from the Aristotelian chaff (Kristjánsson, 2007, Chapter 1).

To sum up, none of those five sweeping explanations appears adequate to make sense of the recent appeal of Aristotelianism in moral education. I believe the crunch question about the cause of its attractiveness admits of a more mundane answer. There is simply a *variety of distinct features* of the Aristotelian position that commend themselves to contemporary educators, and they do commend themselves in that way because they accommodate—better than other candidates in the field—certain powerful and prevailing assumptions in current moral philosophy and moral psychology. Section II presents a brisk tour of ten of those features: the 'pros' of Aristotelianism. While Aristotelians will understandably want to focus on those features, they need to avoid alienating those not ready to take Aristotle as gospel from the outset. In Section III, I explore five versions of the view that Aristotle's position is somehow anachronistic and out-dated. As none of those bears scrutiny, I subsequently address, in Section IV, ten features of Aristotelianism that do not seem to sit well with contemporary moral philosophy and psychology. I call these the 'genuine cons' of Aristotelianism; many of which turn out, on close inspection, to be warped mirror images of the respective 'pros'. I argue in Section IV and the concluding Section V that contemporary Aristotelian educationists may have been too complacent in wanting to sweep those less attractive features under the rug, and that if we want to avoid acquiring Aristotelianism on the cheap, those features need to be engaged head-on: reinterpreted, revised or even rejected.

This article is not an exercise in the history of ideas. My aim is, rather, to use the discussion of Aristotelianism as a window from which to gauge the pertinence of certain salient assumptions in contemporary moral education. Throughout the following sections, I assume basic familiarity with the essentials of Aristotle's virtue-based theory of ethics and education, as well as with its retrievals in current virtue ethics (e.g. those of MacIntyre, 1981,

and Nussbaum, 1990). The aim of this article is not so much to rehearse those essentials as it is to offer meta-reflections on their appeal and adequacy.

II THE PROS OF ARISTOTELIANISM

> Whatever intellectual progress men have achieved rests on [Aristotle's] achievements (Rand, 1963, p. 18).

Why do so many moral philosophers and social scientists nod their heads when reading Aristotle's writings about ethics and education? I single out ten important reasons below.

(a) *Focus and ontological basis*. The focus of Aristotle's ethics is irreducibly *moral* and its ontological basis is *realist* (more specifically *naturalist*). Why should those count as selling points? The first one might seem to constitute a mere platitude; surely the focus of an ethical theory will be moral? Not necessarily so, because a common complaint lodged from both within and outside of social science is that many so-called social scientific accounts of ethical conduct (a.k.a. 'pro-sociality') of late incorporate a 'moral gap'. In the end, many of those accounts are not about morality at all, but rather about social adaptability or effective psychological functioning. A case in point is emotional-intelligence theory which—as already noted—does not place any essentially moral (as distinct from psychological) constraints on 'intelligent' and hence 'appropriate' emotions. This line of thought is entirely foreign to Aristotle. For him, 'appropriate' here can mean nothing less than 'morally appropriate' or 'morally virtuous', just as 'positive' in the label 'positive emotion' can mean nothing less than 'morally positive' (as distinct from merely 'pleasant'). Social scientists, such as the positive psychologists of late, who believe that it is a disparagement of an account of ethical conduct if extraneous (non-moral) dictates are allowed to have the last word on adequacy, and who want to replace 'value clones' with objective moral virtues, do cherish Aristotle's unambiguously *moral* take on pro-sociality (see e.g. Peterson and Seligman, 2004).

Current moral psychologists of an empirical bent (and indeed most, if not all of them, are of such a bent) also applaud the realist-naturalist (namely down-to-earth and non-transcendental) features of Aristotle's account of ethics and education. 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. According to this approach, moral notions cannot be comprehended in abstraction from human ethology and the natural environment in which we live, and we need considerable fence-crossing between philosophy and social science to understand what really makes people flourish or flounder. The same applies, obviously, to the content of moral education aimed at a flourishing

life. Although vexing questions remain about the exact division of labour between philosophy and social science at the borderline in question (witness the debate about 'moralised psychology' versus 'psychologised morality': Kristjánsson, 2010a, Chapter 3), the general ontological assumptions of Aristotelian virtue ethics—what Cordner calls its 'distinctive worldliness' (1994, p. 296)—will be music to the ears of most moral psychologists (see e.g. Lapsley and Narvaez, 2008).

(b) *Ultimate justification in a theory of universal human flourishing*. All endeavours at moral education and virtuous living are, in the end, in the Aristotelian model justified with respect to a rich substantive account of universal human flourishing. For instance, the moral virtues are considered to be states of character constitutive of the flourishing life. While necessary for flourishing (*eudaimonia*), they are not sufficient; we also need good friends, family, health, basic material provision and substantial supplies of moral luck to thrive.

The two key attractions here are 'flourishing' and 'universality'. Ideas of the good life and the educated life that ground them somehow in happiness or wellbeing have always resonated well with educationists (see e.g. White, 2011). The special advantage of Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia* is that it captures both the objective features of wellbeing that typically go missing in prevailing hedonic or life-satisfaction accounts, and also the assumption that a certain kind of fecund pleasure does, in fact, supervene upon the objectively flourishing life (Kristjánsson, 2013a, Chapter 2). Understanding wellbeing or happiness in this way, in terms of *eudaimonia*, is arguably not a mere philosophical stipulation of meaning but corresponds closely to the lay concept.

A constant threat facing accounts of morality—and by extension moral education—is that of cultural relativity. Aristotelianism is particularly well suited to meet this challenge. It couches its account of flourishing, character and virtue in terms that are both non-religious and essentially universal or cosmopolitan (see further in Kristjánsson, 2013b). 'Essentially' is a crucial modifier here, because Aristotle's 'thick but vague' theory of the human good (Nussbaum, 1990) leaves sufficient space for cultural relativity to satisfy all but the most radical relativists. The famous 'golden mean' of virtuous action and emotion is thus partly relative to individual constitution, developmental stage, social role and cultural condition. Yet, and more importantly, 'in our travels we can see how every human being is akin [. . .] to a human being' (Aristotle, 1985, p. 208 [1155a20–22]). In David Carr's (2012) well-chosen words, in the Aristotelian model of moral virtue we do not actually have to know what another person (whether Muslim, communist or atheist) actually values or believes in order to judge whether she is honest, just, courageous, temperate or compassionate; we only need to know that she is inclined to tell the truth, deal with others fairly, stand up for her principles under threat, control her appetites or care for others. The language of virtue thus provides an effective cross-cultural currency of moral evaluation. The case for such mitigated non-relativism has recently been bolstered considerably by empirical work in positive psychology on conceptions of virtues in different societies, religions and moral systems. In

light of this work, positive psychologists claim that people are fundamentally similar wherever they go, and that the spheres of human life wherein our virtues and vices play out have remained relatively constant throughout history (Peterson and Seligman, 2004).

Obviously, this conception of universal human flourishing will not cut ice with all moral psychologists and educationists. However, in an age which speaks more easily than before of 'the global village', and where wellbeing measures are increasingly complementing or even supplanting GNP measures, it is easy to understand why the Aristotelian message strikes a chord with many academics and lay people.

(c) *Idea of intrinsic value*. The assumption in (b) that moral virtues are constitutive of flourishing rather than simply instrumentally related to it ushers into social science an idea that has been dormant there since the days of Max Weber or even longer: the idea of intrinsic value. The *modus operandi* of instrumentalism is that all means are conducive rather than constitutive of their ends—hence not intrinsically valuable—and that the ultimate ends/values at which all human endeavour aims are self-chosen and subjective. (I need not rehearse here how instrumentalism of this kind has blighted the field of aims-based education for decades and is the main ingredient in the misguided 'what works approach'; see e.g. Harðarson, 2012.) When Aristotelians explain the argument behind the claim that not only are ultimate aims of (moral) education objective rather than subjective, but that some of the means to them are intrinsically rather than instrumentally valuable, this argument comes as a revelation to a number of contemporary moral psychologists and seems to be blazing a trail (see e.g. Peterson and Seligman, 2004; cf. Fowers, 2010).

That said, if everything else fails, Aristotelians also have an instrumentalist argument up their sleeves. Recent empirical evidence thus indicates that in addition to its presumed intrinsic value, Aristotelian character education has instrumental benefits, for instance in the form of higher grades in traditional school subjects (cf. Walker, Roberts and Kristjánsson, 2014). Aristotelian moral educators may need to continue to play this trump card in their dealings with politicians and policy makers. More and more social scientists, however, seem to acquiesce in the suggestion that there may be more to the idea of intrinsic value than met Weber's eye.

(d) *Ability to counter situationism*. Standard forms of character education—which assume that young people can acquire stable and global traits of character through moral education—are under threat from the much-discussed situationist literature that casts doubt on the existence of such traits. Those situationist findings need to be taken seriously by Aristotelians precisely because naturalist-realists—supportive as they are of academic trespassing (see (a) above)—must take empirical evidence seriously; and there is only so much that philosophy can settle on its own.

It so happens, however, that Aristotelianism is better equipped than other theories underlying character education to counter situationism. Firstly, Aristotelianism assumes that robust global character traits only appear at the highest level of moral development (that of 'full virtue'), to which most people can only aspire, but that various lower levels (for example those of

'incontinence' and 'continence') still have considerable moral worth compared to the baseline of the morally undeveloped. Secondly, Aristotelians will want to measure the exercise of character traits not through mere behaviour (as typically done in situationist experiments) but through the combination of reason, emotion and action. A person who seems to act well may not do so for the right reason, and hence not possess the respective virtue. Conversely, a person who seems to act badly in a psychological experiment may have been temporarily misled by panic or unfamiliarity. If she feels strong remorse afterwards, she may still possess the character virtue that failed to be exhibited in the experiment. Thirdly, Aristotelianism assumes a much more restrictive sense of 'morally relevant situation' than appears to be the stake in situationism. What Aristotelians are interested in is not how people act in situations that are so alien to them that they have no previous experience to draw upon, but rather how they act in 'virtue-calibrated situations': namely, situations that should ideally tap into an existing moral schema, or what Aristotelians call '*hexis*' (see further in Kristjánsson, 2010a, Chapter 6; Kristjánsson, 2013a, Chapter 6). The real strength of those counter-arguments lies in the fact that they are not contrived as *ad hoc* evasive strategies to parry attacks by situationists, but rather they have been part and parcel of the Aristotelian arsenal from the very beginning.

(e) *Respect for ordinary moral language*. In Anscombe's (1958) diatribe on the state of modern moral philosophy—in particular utilitarianism and Kantianism—there was one slight comfort: ordinary language about morality, the language commonly employed at the kitchen table or in the classroom about morality, is alright as it is: focussing as it always has on people's virtues and vices. To be sure, whatever one's ultimate view may be on utilitarianism and Kantianism, ordinary people have never judged moral worth in terms of its 'maximisation of pleasure' or its 'obeisance of practical reason as dictated by the categorical imperative'. One of the main reasons why the new Aristotle-inspired virtue ethics has caught on so quickly in the last few decades is its respect for ordinary moral language. As MacIntyre correctly observes, 'plain persons are in fact generally and to a significant degree proto-Aristotelians' (1998, p. 138). For instance, Aristotelian forms of character education provide teachers and pupils with a non-artificial language to talk about moral conduct in the classroom, language that may have partly gone astray in the last decades but still bears retrieval (cf. Kristjánsson, 2013b).

This reason—in addition to the one already suggested in (a) above—explains why virtue ethics has gained plaudits from a number of social scientists (see e.g. Lapsley and Narvaez, 2008), as they tend to be more sensitive to popular lay conceptions than are philosophers. What the social scientists quickly realise is that Aristotelianism may amount to little more (in a positive sense) than a rigorous systematisation of ordinary intuitions about morality and moral education.

(f) *Nature and specification of the moral virtues*. In Aristotelianism, there is nothing other-worldly or uppercase-abstract-like about the concept of moral virtue. The virtues simply constitute a subset—albeit a *unique*

subset—of the skills that people need to live well (Annas, 1993, 2011; Kristjánsson, 2013a, Chapter 1). More specifically, the virtues are settled states of character, concerned with a morally praiseworthy or blameworthy combination of attention, emotion, desire, behaviour and style of expression in specific (significant and distinguishable) spheres of human life. In some of those spheres (elucidated in Aristotle, 1985), *acting* well for the right reason matters most; in others the *emotional* component is the crucial one (Aristotle, 1991). The list of virtues remains open-ended and essentially corrigible. As long as one can argue satisfactorily that a distinct sphere of human existence can be carved out where a given state of character constitutes living well in that sphere, that state of character is a moral virtue.

From my experience, the aspect of Aristotelian virtue theory that ordinary people find most appealing is its golden-mean structure (of virtue as a medial state between two extremes of deficiency and excess). As a very similar architectonic can also be found in Confucian virtue ethics (Yu, 2007), one may wonder whether this aspect taps into deeply entrenched lay conceptions. Robert C. Roberts—in his brilliant recent book on emotional virtues—notes the irony of how little of the writing on virtue ethics post-Anscombe (1958) contains sustained reflections on particular virtues, as distinct from mere illustrations of more abstract ideals (2013, p. 18). I would want to add to this point the complaint that too much may have been written about virtue in comparison with vice. One more reason to favour Aristotle's own brand of virtue ethics is that his account is particularly strong both on analyses of individual virtues and their respective vices.

(g) *Unique and central role of emotions*. As can be gleaned from (f), Aristotelianism offers—in comparison to Kantianism or standard forms of utilitarianism—a uniquely prioritised position to emotions as parts of virtues (and hence of the good life). Some virtues are simply emotions, full stop, such as compassion (pain at another's undeserved plight) that can constitute a full-blown virtue although one may not have the ability to do anything about the plight in question. Emotional traits are seen as reason-responsive and educable; the individual is not simply prey to ungovernable passions. Accordingly, moral education—in its early stages at least—will more than anything involve sensitisation to proper emotions which, in turn, start to function as moral barometers and motivators.

Education of the emotions has, of course, become a buzzword in many recent approaches to moral emotion. Aristotelianism offers the additional bonus of supplying those approaches with an ontology of 'soft rationalism' that makes full sense of the role and salience of emotions, without buying into unsavoury forms of sentimentalism about emotions as arational and independent creators of moral value (Kristjánsson, 2010b).

(h) *Moral holism*. US-style character education has often been criticised for offering a laundry list of virtues but failing to provide students with any reflective, holistic mechanisms to adjudicate between virtues in cases of conflict. Unfortunately, the most recent form of character education— 'positive education' (Peterson and Seligman, 2004) that ameliorates

various shortcomings in previous accounts—fails for a number of reasons to make amends in this crucial area (Kristjánsson, 2013a, Chapter 7).

Aristotle's demand for reflective holism is, in contrast, stringent and clear. For grown-ups at least, their conduct does not count as virtuous unless it is chosen for the right reasons from 'a firm and unchanging state' of character, is motivated by the right emotions and has been overseen and adjudicated by the intellectual virtue of *phronesis* which acts as a moral integrator when two virtues, such as compassion and honesty, clash (Aristotle, 1985, p. 40 [1105a30–34]). In the Aristotelian model of moral education, education towards reflective competence (namely, becoming a *phronimos*) must thus *ex hypothesi* be the ultimate goal (although Aristotle is less than clear about how this is to be executed; see Section IV(f) below).

(i) *Non-individualist approach*. Yet one more common lament about standard forms of character education that *does not* hit at Aristotelianism is that it is unduly individualist: all about 'fixing the kids'. In order to understand what virtue ethics and virtue education is all about, one needs however, according to Aristotle, not only study the *Nicomachean Ethics* but also his *Politics*. Proper moral education is simply unthinkable outside of well-governed moral communities, offering systematic public education and providing citizens with the basic necessities they need to function well (MacIntyre, 1981; Nussbaum, 1990). Neither is Aristotelian virtue ethics self-centred *vis-à-vis* an excessive focus on how to make oneself a better person. For Aristotle, there is simply no way that one can exercise one's personal virtues without benefitting others at the same time; in the case of friends, the very distinction between one's 'self' and the 'selves' of significant others even becomes blurred, as a true friend acts as one's second self.

Given Aristotle's unambiguously non-individualist stance regarding ethics and education, it is difficult to understand recurrent hues and cries about all character education being essentially individualist (see further in Kristjánsson, 2013b).

(j) *Educational emphasis*. For present purposes, the aspect of Aristotelianism that does—or at least should—make it most palatable to contemporary moral educators is its unremitting emphasis on education. Contemporary moral philosophy is commonly lambasted—by moral psychologists for example—for its lack of attention to developmental issues and its almost complete neglect of childhood. Aristotle's stance is so radically different here that he could almost be accused of the opposite error: of reducing moral philosophy to moral education. For him, it is more precious to know how virtue arises than to know what it is (see Tachibana, 2012, pp. 51–52). More specifically, regarding moral inquiry as such, its purpose 'is not to know what virtue is, but to become good, since otherwise the inquiry would be of no benefit to us' (Aristotle, 1985, p. 35 [1103b27–29]). In Aristotelianism, then, character education is not an extraneous addition to an understanding of morality or the study of moral philosophy; it is, rather, what such understanding and study are all about.

More than any of the other features that I have delineated in this section, perhaps, the accent on moral education explains why Aristotle's pioneering

work continues to serve as an unsurpassable source of inspiration for contemporary moral educators.

III INTERLUDE ON SOME ILLUSORY CONS OF ARISTOTELIANISM

> I reject the . . . domesticating of Aristotle's thought. . . . We live in a different world and cannot will ourselves back. . . . When interpretative charity makes Aristotle speak the truth by saying what we say, charity becomes condescension (Garver, 2006, p. 3).

Before turning to what I consider to be the 'genuine cons' of Aristotelianism for contemporary moral education, let me briefly mention and cast aside five distinct concerns that have been raised about Aristotelianism as out-dated and anachronistic, and about whether trying to raise Aristotle's spectre in modernity collapses unduly the distance between him and 'us' moderns.

(a) *Empirical inadequacies*. Aristotle's views on the intellectual and/or motivational natural inferiority of slaves, manual workers and women are embarrassingly erroneous, full stop. Revamped Aristotelianism without those views is, however, misbegotten Aristotelianism.

The response to this complaint is simple. Just as with his biology, no one takes those arguments seriously nowadays; indeed, there is something quintessentially Aristotelian about ignoring arguments that have been refuted by empirical evidence. Recall also that these arguments came about originally as the downsides of Aristotle's unrelenting empiricism, in wanting to accommodate the best available evidence in his day as expressed through the 'appearances' (*endoxa*) of the 'many and the wise'. This fidelity to prevailing 'best evidence' prevented Aristotle from taking some of the bold imaginative leaps that Plato was able to take, guided by pure speculation, for example about the nature of women.

(b) *Irreconcilable vocabularies*. There is no perfect overlap between Greek and English vocabularies concerning, say, emotions and virtues. The Greek term for emotional reactions ('*pathe*') is not even the literal equivalent of the word 'emotion' (Konstan, 2006, Chapter 1); Aristotle's '*eleos*' is not exactly the same as either 'compassion' or 'pity' in today's English; his use of 'courage' focuses specifically on what we would call 'courage in battle' (Cordner, 1994); and so forth.

My riposte would be that although it is true that the Greek lexicon does not map neatly onto modern English concepts, this type of linguistic relativity is not injurious to the application of Aristotelianism to modern concerns. After all, the role of the moral philosopher is not to record and report prevailing linguistic usage, but rather to argue for the way specific terms should most serviceably be used. For example, if we are clear about the cognitions and desires that we deem important to a given emotion, then we can easily abstract away from linguistic differences and extract the core emotion we seek (Kristjánsson, 2007, Chapter 1).

(c) *Assumption of moral inequality*. Aristotelianism assumes that people are of unequal moral worth, depending on their demonstrated level of moral attainment. This assumption flies in the face of a contrary assumption which is not only ingrained in Kantianism and utilitarianism but is part of a larger modern moral outlook: namely, that people are of equal moral worth *qua* persons (see e.g. Cordner, 1994).

Heeding the message from Williams's (1993) masterful assimilation of ancient and modern moralities, however, we must be wary of people conflating what they think they think with what they really think. (For instance, when Christians think they are objecting to Aristotelian pride, they may simply be objecting to what Aristotle would call 'conceit'.) Regarding moral equality, whatever lip service moderns may pay to it, would anyone have compunction about choosing to save one Mother Teresa rather than two Adolf Hitlers from a burning house? Furthermore, accepting the unequal *moral worth of persons* is not necessarily tantamount to assuming, across the line, the unequal *worth of moral persons* (cf. Hare, 1996). For instance, there are undoubtedly sound Aristotelian reasons for giving all people, as potential moral agents, a chance to prove their mettle (by providing equal opportunities of education, giving strangers the benefit of the doubt in human relations, etc.). Logically, there is thus nothing wrong with the idea of people, who happen to be of unequal moral worth as persons, being treated equally, for moral reasons, in various spheres of life (cf. Kristjánsson, 2002, Chapter 4).

(d) *Heteronomous self-concept*. It is commonly argued (see e.g. Cordner, 1994; Konstan, 2006, Chapter 1) that the socio-moral world of the Greeks was unlike our own in key respects. The ancient Greeks were purportedly preoccupied with concerns about pride, honour, rivalry, social standing and face-saving. The emotions elicited in that context, such as *shame*, were typically responses to situations that resulted from actions entailing consequences for one's social position rather than for one's personal ideals. Indeed, private sanctions (experienced through what we moderns refer to as *guilt*) did not really motivate the Greeks—only social sanctions did—as their self-concept was essentially heteronomous, with no relevant distinction being made there between doing the good and being seen to do the good.

A close study of Greek sources, however, reveals that the ancient Greeks were as capable as we are of experiencing self-focused, autonomous guilt as distinct from other-focused, heteronomous shame. Indeed, the very distinction between so-called 'shame societies' and 'guilt societies' does not seem to bear scrutiny (Williams, 1993). Moreover, a certain obsession with one's social standing is hardly a condition specific to the ancients. Judging from the media buzz surrounding the recently fashionable concept of 'status anxiety', it seems to be an equally familiar obsession to moderns and, indeed, a universal phenomenon (see further in Kristjánsson, 2002, Chapter 4; 2007, Chapter 1; cf. Putman, 1995).

(e) *Irreconcilable political assumptions*. John Wallach (1992) argues that the political relativity of Aristotle's claims, as rooted in the Greek *polis*, make it impossible to shear from his system any script from which we

moderns might take our cues, without eliminating its coherence and emptying it of substance. In Wallach's view, such a transcultural undertaking violates Aristotle's own insistence on the unity of form and content. More specifically, it disregards the way in which Aristotle's historical context (such as prevailing conditions of political power) constitutes the meaning and scope of his views. Mulgan (2000) argues, in a similar vein, that Aristotle was, contra Nussbaum (1990) no 'social democrat' and that his political assumptions were, on the whole, much too 'antidemocratic and antiliberal' (p. 82) to have any mileage in debates in Western liberal democracies.

   If we concentrate on Aristotle's political writings, narrowly construed, Wallach may have a point. Even though Wallach's analysis belies the inherent radicalism of some of Aristotle's political ideas—for his time as well as for ours—it is true that many of those ideas transcend their time and place in the Greek *polis* poorly, if at all. As against that, however, it must be noted that the recent renaissance of Aristotelianism in moral education has never aimed at a reconstruction of political conditions in ancient Greece; what interests current moral educationists is, rather, Aristotle's conception of universal human functioning (recall Section IV(b) above). Regarding Mulgan's argument, on the other hand, it seems to have the paradoxical implication that Aristotle's political views are, after all, relevant today; for what Mulgan tries to show is that Aristotle can be seen, by modern lights, as a sort of political conservative rather than a social democrat (2000, p. 95). If that is the case, however, then there seems to be nothing wrong with using his views as currency in contemporary political debates, albeit not in the way that Nussbaum (1990) envisages.

IV THE GENUINE CONS OF ARISTOTELIANISM

   Aristotle is Plato diluted by common sense (Russell, 1946, p. 159).

After exploring those 'illusory cons', I turn in this section to what I consider to be 'genuine cons' in applying Aristotelianism to contemporary moral education. It is here that contemporary Aristotelians need to engage in some serious reconstruction work, or simply decide to depart from the historical Aristotle, unless they want to be led down academic rabbit holes. My elucidation of the ten following cons will be shorter than that of the pros in Section II; it is not because those are necessarily less salient but simply because—like Eve's dirty children—they have generally elicited less sustained exposure.

   (a) *The 'best life' of contemplation*. Ordinary readers of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (and most of the current secondary literature on it) may be forgiven to think that it is a treatise about the good life for human beings, constituted predominantly by virtuous, *phronesis*-guided conduct. It, therefore, comes as a bolt from the blue when Aristotle suddenly announces in Book 10 that *phronesis* is actually not the supreme activity in *eudaimonia* but rather

contemplation, meaning the self-sufficient, god-like and leisurely theoretical study of unchanging things: the supreme objects of knowledge. This bold claim has received scant attention outside of the hermetically sealed hothouse of Aristotelian studies. Even within that hothouse, scholars have been busy trying to write it off as a later addition by one of Aristotle's disciples, or providing fanciful reinterpretations of contemplation as the amplification of knowledge already presupposed by the virtuous life (see e.g. Garver, 2006, p. 199). It seems to me, however, that far from constituting a 'bug' in Aristotle's philosophy, Book 10 is an ingrained, ineliminable part of it. If that is the case, Aristotelian moral educationists cannot, with impunity, pretend that this part of Aristotelianism does not exist—unless, that is, they are happy to adopt recognisably un-Aristotelian positions.

(b) *The elusiveness of a grand-end moral theory*. Reigning supreme in a substantial part of recent Aristotelian scholarship—not least the scholarship concerned with Aristotle's views on moral education—is a particularist interpretation of *phronesis*, according to which moral wisdom is about non-generalisable situational appreciation of all things noble, without the need for any general moral theory or grand-end moral arithmetic. I have criticised this interpretation sternly before (Kristjánsson, 2007, Chapter 11). From an exegetical point of view, I believe this interpretation is wrong; it overlooks Aristotle's insistence that the *phronimoi* have not only gained insight and sensitivity from repeated experiences but also have an understanding of the general 'first principles' of morality, acquired for instance by reading the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The particularist interpretation turns Aristotle into an ancient version of the later Wittgenstein: a 'Wittgenstotle'. More importantly for present non-panegyrical purposes, the particularist interpretation deprives the *phronimoi* of sufficiently contentful, theory-laden conceptions of living well to guide their moral deliberations (see Kraut, 1993). The moral educator, thus, no longer has any theoretically unified basis on which to base instructions to moral learners, and the advantage of moral holism in Aristotelianism (recall Section II(h)), as well as the advantage of the analogy of virtues to skills, are lost (cf. Annas, 1993, pp. 67–68). Likening *phronesis* to the autofocus mechanism on a camera is fine (Garver, 2006, p. 101), but that mechanism is based on a complicated set of general engineering principles of which the camera designers need to be in full grasp. The 'autofocus' metaphor may not even work in the case of large-scale global or international co-ordination problems (say, the issue of global warming or the Israeli–Palestinian conflict). *Phronesis* based exclusively on situational appreciation derived from previous experiences—in default of an overarching grand-end theory— provides scant help with solving such problems. That said, the exact contours of Aristotle's grand-end moral theory are not pellucid, apart from cryptic remarks about those virtues being most important that benefit most people. There is considerable rescue work to be done here. In any case, the particularist interpretation makes moral learners go off the scent, and the case against it needs to be re-prosecuted if Aristotelianism is to work as a sound basis for moral education.

(c) *Over-systematisation*. Various passages in Aristotle's corpus smack of over-systematisation. He has an off-putting tendency to want to define categories with respect to their most realisable specimens—so that for example people are either *phronimoi* or merely continent, whereas one would presume that a great many people are somewhere in between the two; and his out-and-out rejection of pity (pain at someone else's deserved bad fortune), as an emotional trait characteristic of bad people only, bears the mark of a forced assimilation to a grand project of making all desert-based emotions fit the same blueprint, without any grey areas (see Kristjánsson, 2006, Chapter 3). This shortcoming may be but the warped mirror image of Aristotle's meticulous analyses of individual virtues and vices; yet this rigidity of thought clouds his vision, and it is particularly pernicious for accounts of moral development and moral education: accounts that are as much about all the in-between states as they are about fully actualised instances.

(d) *No empathy or sympathy*. Aristotle does give pride of place to compassion as an emotional virtue, but he defines it quite specifically as pain at another person's *undeserved* bad fortune. There is no room in Aristotle's virtue theory for *sympathy*—pure fellow feeling towards another person's plight, whether deserved or not, and there is no discussion of the psychological capacity that moral philosophers (at least since the 18th century) and contemporary moral psychologists consider to underlie other-directed emotions: namely, *empathy*. One cannot help but be struck by these absences. While empathy can perhaps be written into Aristotle's theory without too much scholarly tinkering, the accommodation of sympathy can hardly be achieved without an overhaul of the whole edifice. Is that too high a price to pay for the realignment of Aristotelianism to contemporary moral education?

(e) *The hopelessness of bad education*. I mentioned the unremitting educational emphasis as an Aristotelian pro in Section II(j). The downside of that emphasis is, however, Aristotle's radical pessimism about the possibility that people who have received bad moral education in their early years will ever be able to see the light and develop morally. Notably, Aristotle does not claim that people who have received good education will necessarily turn out good; moral virtue still requires considerable personal effort. But he is quite adamant—to take a modern analogy—that a person who is given an inferior racing car will never win a Formula 1 race. The problem with this view is the fact that most of us will claim to know examples of individuals who, despite gruelling circumstances in their upbringing and a lack of moral role models, have nevertheless succeeded in transcending those conditions and acquiring a moral character. Once again, contemporary Aristotelians may be well advised to relax the rigidity of Aristotle's position somewhat.

(f) *The paradox of moral education*. This Aristotelian con is—in contrast to most of the others discussed in this section—a much-belaboured one in moral-education circles. The paradox is simply this: how can it be simultaneously true that it is the aim of moral education to develop persons capable of autonomous engagement in rational moral conduct (recall

Section II(h)) and that this goal can only be secured by inculcating from an early age certain ready-made habits of action and feeling, via the essential Aristotelian method of *habituation* (see Kristjánsson, 2007, Chapter 3, for various references and observations)? This paradox has both a cognitive and a motivational aspect. One could argue that Sherman (1989) has provided an adequate account of the *cognitive* development from habituated virtue to reflective virtue, with her elucidation of an Aristotelian method that involves the careful, gradual nourishment of the moral learner's discernment of ethically salient features of situations. The snag there, however, is that there is no textual support for this 'Aristotelian' method in Aristotle's corpus; quite the contrary, in fact (Curzer, 2012, Chapter 15), and as Tachibana (2012, pp. 54–55) correctly points out, it is based on a radical reconstruction of Aristotle's views. Curren (2013) has given careful consideration to the *motivational* aspect of the paradox: that the better the moral educator is as a role model, the more likely it is that the moral learner becomes inclined towards the good because of love of the educator rather than the content of the education—unless, that is, we posit an intrinsic need in human beings for autonomous self-determination, which seems to go beyond anything that Aristotle explicitly says on this issue. Once again, contemporary Aristotelian moral educationists need to make some urgent decisions about how far they are willing to depart from Aristotle—and what exactly they need to add to his theory—to overcome the paradox in question.

   (g) *Lack of a systematic methodology of moral education*. It is not as if contemporary Aristotelian moral educators are devoid of methods to cultivate virtue in moral learners. Aristotle's corpus is teeming with ideas on how to achieve that end via habituation, emulation of moral exemplars, service learning (learning to be just by doing just acts, etc.), use of relevant literary sources, and the administering of the proper music to arouse appropriate emotions and pleasures. The problem is rather that those ideas are not co-ordinated or synchronised into a systematic age-and-development-adjusted methodology. It is incumbent, therefore, on contemporary Aristotelians to design such a methodology almost from scratch. Not many of them have so far risen to that challenge (see Sanderse, 2012, however, for a notable exception).

   (h) *Lack of instruments to measure moral virtue*. Aristotelian virtue ethics is, as already explained, a type of moral naturalism. Moral naturalists are realists about morality; they believe that such moral properties as honesty or wickedness really are features of the natural world. For naturalists, statements about 'moral facts' are true if they correspond to this natural reality, but false if they do not. The great majority of existing instruments to measure moral character—for instance the positive psychological VIA-instruments for youth and adults (Peterson and Seligman, 2004)—are, however, simple self-report questionnaires. Moral realists complain about possible response biases in such measures caused by self-deception. In response, anti-realists can ask what sorts of measures the realists have then devised to measure, say, objective moral virtue (rather than simply people's own conceptions of how virtuous they

are), and the answer is not readily forthcoming: no tried-and-tested instruments to concretise and measure moral virtue—on an Aristotelian naturalist-realist conception—seem to exist. But this lacuna calls the very idea of Aristotelian character-educational projects into question, as those projects will need, in order to establish their scientific credibility, pre-and-post tests of their impact on moral virtue. It could be asked why Aristotle himself did not address this problem. There are two obvious reasons for that. One is that the *Nicomachean Ethics* is written for people already 'brought up in fine habits' (1985, p. 6 [1095b4–b6]): namely, people who have, so to speak, experienced the benefits of education in good character on their own skin and need no further convincing of its salience. The second reason is that Aristotle's age was not as obsessed as ours is with measurements, and he was not forced to compete—as today's character educationists need to—with advocates of various other programmes that are also meant to enhance the pro-social functioning of the young but without foregrounding their moral virtues. That said, contemporary moral educators cannot avoid addressing this measurement problem head-on, preferably through Aristotle-inspired (if not Aristotle's own) insights.

(i) *The P.R. problem*. In trying to get the Aristotelian message across to policy makers, politicians and teacher-training institutions, Aristotelians seems to be facing an uphill battle of public relations. Although various 'myths' about the assumptions and implications of Aristotle-based character education may have been defused in the academic sector (Kristjánsson, 2013b), they persist as an uncomfortable residue in other sectors, where purely academic arguments do not seem to have the required taxonomic bite (Walker, Roberts and Kristjánsson, 2014). Politicians, in particular, seem dead scared of being accused of paternalistic interventions in the life-decisions of autonomic citizens; approaching politicians in dialogue sometimes feels like entering shark-infested waters. Although popular surveys in various countries show overwhelming parental support for virtue education in schools, those findings typically fall on deaf years in policy circles. Aristotelians need to assume the mantle of knowledge brokers and to couch their views in a language that is less off-putting than some of the current academic vocabulary seems to be for those who take the eventual decisions on what is included in teacher-training and school curricula.

(j) *The flexibility question*. Although virtue education is a hot topic on today's educational agendas, not all of it is based on Aristotelian precedents. Some virtue ethicists are sceptical of attempts to flog the Aristotelian horse and suggest other theoretical avenues, ranging from Confucius all the way to Nietzsche (Aristotle's very own *nemesis* in MacIntyre's 1981 *After Virtue*). Especially in light of the rising interest in non-Aristotelian forms of virtue education in Asia, Aristotelian moral educationists need to make up their minds as to how ready they are to embrace ecumenism in this area and whether they can allow themselves to be flexible enough to accept wholly non-Aristotelian forms of virtue ethics as legitimate.

V CONCLUDING REMARKS

> While we are men, we cannot help, to a great extent, being Aristotelians (Newman, 1982 [1852], p. 83).

I have tried to show in this article how contemporary Aristotelian moral education is tied by innumerable threads both to Aristotle's achievements and limitations. While there is no reason for present-day Aristotelians to kneel to Aristotle and accept all he says as gospel, vexing questions remain as to how far they can allow themselves to depart from his insights and still claim their Aristotelian heritage. Each generation must appropriate those insights anew. Idolatry that forms too solid a crust may stop the inlets of fresh new findings—something which the naturalist Aristotle himself would have taken strong exception to.

While I personally find myself in broad—if sometimes uneasy— agreement with the features of Aristotelianism that I have labelled as 'pros' in Section II, I worry that contemporary Aristotelians have tended to underplay the 'cons' explored in Section IV, even to the point of sweeping them under the rug. This is why I mentioned in Section I the danger of trying to achieve Aristotelianism on the cheap. There is, to be sure, no substitute for clear thinking—which is why, when thinking clearly about moral education, there is no substitute for Aristotle's sharp and sober eye. But even if we stand, by necessity, in a master-apprentice relationship to him, apprentices are often justified in upstaging their masters. I hope this article has persuaded at least some contemporary Aristotelians of the need to engage critically with his corpus in order to move today's moral education forward.

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