

THE HUMAN AND EDUCATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF
HONESTY AS AN EPISTEMIC AND MORAL VIRTUE

David Carr

School of Education
University of Birmingham

ABSTRACT. While honesty is clearly a virtue of some educational as well as moral significance, its virtue-ethical status is far from clear. In this essay, following some discussion of latter-day virtue ethics and virtue epistemology, David Carr argues that honesty exhibits key features of both moral and epistemic virtue, and, more precisely, that honesty as a virtue might best be understood as the epistemic component of Aristotelian practical wisdom. In the wake of arguments to be found in Plato's *Laws*, as well as in those of more modern philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Iris Murdoch, Carr then traces the main roots of moral dishonesty to various forms of vain and self-delusive ego attachment. In this light, he argues in the final section of the essay that literature and the arts may provide a powerful educational antidote to such attachment.

HONESTY, VIRTUE ETHICS, AND VIRTUE EPISTEMOLOGY

While few may have doubted that honesty is, at least generally, a positive and desirable moral quality — and that dishonesty, in its basic forms of untruthfulness, deceit, or cheating, is morally bad or undesirable — there might yet be more disagreement about *why* dishonesty is bad or wrong. To be sure, under the influence on modern academic and popular thought of various forms of contractual and prosocial ethical theory, it would appear that dishonesty has been deplored mostly on the grounds that it undermines social cohesion, solidarity, and/or interpersonal trust.¹ However, in a premodern ethical tradition harking back to classical Greek antiquity and variously observed in contemporary “virtue ethics,” honesty has also usually been regarded as not just a moral good but a *virtue*. In this light, honesty — or its conceptual analogues in the ethics of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and others — features as a key virtue, not *only* because it contributes to the common good — though this is certainly to be reckoned *one* of the moral benefits of honesty — but because it conduces to the good or welfare of the characters or souls of honest agents themselves. On either score, of course, the teaching or promotion of honesty would have to be regarded as of the highest *educational* importance. However, given certain complexities and ambiguities in both ancient and modern views of the nature of virtue as such, the precise logical form and moral status of

1. For some past work on honesty and dishonesty that takes broadly this line, see Richard C. Cabot, *Honesty* (New York: Macmillan, 1938); Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (New York: Random House, 1978); and Charles Fried, “The Evil of Lying,” in *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life: Introductory Readings in Ethics*, ed. Christina Sommers and Fred Sommers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989). While Tara Smith seeks to move beyond this by focusing on the self-regarding benefits of honesty, her approach — from the rather different perspective adopted in this essay — still seems rather instrumentalist; see Tara Smith, “The Metaphysical Case for Honesty,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 37, no. 4 (2003): 517–531.

honesty seems puzzling. In order to appreciate why this is so, some consideration of recent philosophical work in ethics and epistemology must here be attempted.

To begin with, we should note the marked Aristotelian turn in latter-day philosophy — often traced to Elizabeth Anscombe's major critique of post-World War II moral philosophy.² However, such Aristotelian development in ethics has been paralleled or replicated in the theory of knowledge with the more recent rise of so-called virtue epistemology.³ Notwithstanding other philosophical influences on modern virtue ethics, it is also clear that the main reference point for both modern virtue ethics and virtue epistemology is Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* — more precisely, book 6 of that work in which Aristotle distinguishes between various "intellectual" virtues of scientific (epistemic) knowledge, artistic skill or expertise, practical wisdom, intuitive reason, and philosophical wisdom. For present purposes, the most significant of these intellectual virtues are practical wisdom (*phronesis*) — the virtue that Aristotle explores elsewhere in the *Ethics* as required for the cultivation of moral virtue — and epistemic virtue, which is concerned with the discernment of knowledge and truth.

Aristotle's intellectual virtue of practical wisdom has a precise remit with regard to a peculiar sphere of human concerns and operations. It is especially concerned with the rational cultivation of the subrational appetitive, emotional, and desiderative aspects of human life and experience to the end of so-called human flourishing. In this light, Aristotelian moral virtues may be regarded as more or less equivalent to emotions, feelings, or appetites ordered in accordance with some deliberative ideal of practical wisdom.⁴ But while such practical deliberation is no doubt concerned with the production of morally good, right, or virtuous conduct, Aristotle considers its main role to be the cultivation of moral *character*. Moreover, his account radically reverses the modern ethical assumption that the moral rectitude of actions would first have to be determined prior to establishing what counts as good character. For Aristotle, since reliable practical deliberation is dependent on right ordering of the subrational appetitive and affective dimensions of virtue, there cannot ever — especially given the particular and contextualized

2. G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 1–19.

3. Although the literature here is substantial, see, for present purposes, Ernest Sosa, *Knowledge in Perspective: Selected Essays in Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Ernest Sosa, *A Virtue Epistemology*, volume 1 of *Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

4. For this characterization of moral virtue, see David Carr, "Virtue, Mixed Emotions and Moral Ambivalence," *Philosophy* 84, no. 1 (2009): 31–46.

nature of moral agency — be good judgment about what it is morally right to do on the part of those lacking virtuous character. In short, morally good or right actions may be explained or understood only as those that an agent of good or virtuous moral character would perform.

Virtue epistemology seeks to take a leaf out of the book of Aristotelian virtue ethics. Just as the radical move of virtue ethics is to explain morally right conduct in terms of virtuous character rather than vice-versa, so virtue epistemology aims no less radically to account for knowledge in terms of epistemic character rather than truth-supporting properties of belief. In short, appeal to the intellectual capacity of epistemic virtue is alleged to solve major problems of knowledge justification of traditional epistemology, such as Gettier objections to traditional “justified-true-belief” accounts of knowledge.⁵ While the epistemic virtues of virtue epistemology comprise a rather heterogeneous group, they are prone to broad division in terms of the somewhat divergent emphases of the two main virtue epistemological camps of reliabilism and responsibilism: whereas reliabilists⁶ are inclined to regard such faculties or capacities as good memory, clear and accurate perception, and sound reasoning as epistemic virtues, responsibilists⁷ focus more on such character traits as honesty, open-mindedness, scholarly rigor, and intellectual courage (though such virtues do not divide neatly between the two camps).

While I cannot here pause for detailed evaluation of the extent to which reliabilism and responsibilism adequately address time-honored issues of knowledge justification,⁸ some present comment on these matters seems nevertheless required. As already noted, it is clear that a key source for virtue epistemology is book 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in which Aristotle distinguishes several capacities required for acquisition of various kinds of intellectual and practical knowledge, ability, or skill under the general heading of *intellectual* virtues. However, there may seem to be an immediate issue about whether the term “virtue” as here more generally applied to intellectual virtues has the same *sense* or meaning as it has when more specifically applied elsewhere in the *Nicomachean Ethics* to *moral* characteristics — especially if we recall the wider than modern English sense of the original Greek source of this term (for “excellence”). Given such ambiguity, it is arguable that much latter-day virtue epistemology — not least the attempts of some responsibilists to model the epistemic capacities of intellectual virtue on the more particular conception of moral virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics* — rests on a mistake.

5. See Edmund L. Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?,” in *Knowledge and Belief*, ed. A. Phillips Griffiths (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 144–146.

6. See, for example, Sosa, *Knowledge in Perspective*; and Sosa, *A Virtue Epistemology*.

7. See, especially, Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*.

8. For a generally helpful discussion of the problems of contemporary virtue epistemology as an approach to the resolution of traditional problems of knowledge justification, see Jason S. Baehr, “Character in Epistemology,” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 128, no. 3 (2006): 479–514.

First, it would seem that although the Aristotle of *Nicomachean Ethics* is a moral *naturalist*, for whom there are objectively better or worse moral judgments or decisions, he is not a moral *realist* in the sense of believing that there are “external” moral truths apt for discovery via some “disinterested” moral reason: as he clearly insists, it is the job of practical wisdom not to discover some Platonic form of the good, but to produce good persons or agents. However, Aristotle is clearly an epistemic, theoretical, or scientific realist, explicitly defending a version of the correspondence theory of truth in his *Metaphysics*.⁹ But such considerations surely spoil any plausible analogy between morally virtuous deliberation and action, on the one hand, and (virtuous or other) scientific or theoretical knowledge and inquiry, on the other. For, on the face of it, the practical moral virtues of courage, temperance, or justice appear to have — as it has often been put — a different *direction of fit* from epistemic virtues.¹⁰ In sum, while we may reasonably consider morally right actions to be (up to a point) those that a virtuous agent would perform, what counts as knowledge or justified true belief could not depend in the same way on epistemic ability or virtue: on the contrary, epistemic virtue could only be that which ensures or guarantees *objective* knowledge.

At all events, such considerations would seem to engender difficulties for understanding the virtue-ethical status of *honesty* — about, precisely, whether honesty is best regarded as an epistemic or as a moral virtue. On the one hand, the logical object or “target” of honesty would seem to be *truth*, in which case honesty has the belief-to-world direction of fit — and some concern with truth might be expected of the honest agent. Further, while agents might be considered epistemically defective by dint of failure to seek truth on this or that matter, it is not always obvious that we should regard them as *morally* dishonest on this account. On the other hand, if honesty is taken to imply commitment to *truthfulness*, it seems clear that we do morally blame agents for lying or concealing the truth. That said, since the idea of *excess* honesty seems to make little sense, there is no obvious Aristotelian *mean* here as in the case of other moral virtues. (To be sure, we might *say* that agents have been *too* honest when they bluntly hurt others’ feelings: but the moral defect here would not be dishonesty or excess of honesty but lack of tact or sympathy.) Moreover, while Aristotle discusses what he calls truthfulness in the *Nicomachean Ethics*,¹¹ it is not obvious that his characterization of this as a mean between boastfulness and undue modesty is what we should ordinarily conceive as honesty. Rather, Aristotle’s truthfulness seems more about some kind of social comportment — a willingness or reluctance

9. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 749.

10. For this general idea, see J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962); John Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and also G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963), 56.

11. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. McKeon, book 5, section 7, pp. 998–1000.

to crow about one's virtues or achievements — than whether an agent cares about what is thus and so as such. In sum, however, it seems that the virtue of honesty occupies a rather uncertain or ambivalent position between moral and epistemic virtue.

HONESTY AS A VIRTUE

All this does seem to require further attention to the logical and/or moral status and function of honesty and to how — if we believe that it is of general human value and importance — it might be motivated, cultivated, or promoted. Going back to the wellspring of Western ethics, of the four cardinal virtues of antiquity, Socrates appears to have given pride of place to *wisdom* insofar as one could not properly be said to possess the other virtues of courage, temperance, and justice without it. Since Socrates seems to have regarded ignorance as the source of vice, he would also seem to have accorded to wisdom the same moral-epistemic role — of dispelling the various vain delusions to which flesh is heir — as might also be attributed to honesty as a moral virtue. On this view, however, vice seems to be mainly the consequence of *ignorance* of the truth, so that agents cannot actually be *blamed* for their moral error or wickedness if they had no clear knowledge of what they were doing. However, there are clearly difficulties with this counterintuitive position that have exercised readers of Plato's Socratic dialogues from his time to the present.

First, there is the much-rehearsed motivational problem of whether moral wisdom, knowledge, or honesty as such may suffice for practical virtue. For while Socrates himself seems to have subscribed to a kind of moral *internalism* — holding that moral wisdom as knowledge is in and of itself enough to guarantee right moral conduct — it has been more usual to take the commonsense view that agents may fully grasp the morally right thing to do and yet fail to act accordingly. Indeed, it seems to be part of common moral experience that people often act badly in full knowledge that they are so doing. But, second, even if one takes the realist Socratic view that the objective truth that wisdom seeks is actually attainable, there is the problem of how to move from epistemic description to moral prescription. What in my current knowledge of how things are in the world can actually help me to decide morally what I should do for the best as an individual agent or member of a wider community? What such time-honored objections to internalist Socratic moral *episteme* suggest is that there must be more to wisdom as a moral virtue than the accurate discernment of truth. In his *Laws*, however, a later, perhaps less Socratic Plato makes the following observation:

But of all faults of the soul the gravest is one which is inborn in most men, one which all excuse in themselves and none therefore attempts to avoid — that conveyed in the maxim that "everyone is naturally his own friend" and that it is only right and proper that he should be so, whereas, in truth, this same violent attachment to self is the constant source of all manner of misdeeds in every one of us. The eye of love is blind where the beloved is concerned and so a man proves a bad judge of right, good, honour, in the conceit that more regard is due to his personality than to the real fact, whereas a man who means to be great must care neither for self nor for its belongings, but for justice, whether exhibited in his own conduct or rather in that of another. From this same fault springs also that universal conviction that one's own folly is wisdom, with its consequences that we fancy we know everything when we

know as good as nothing, refuse to allow others to manage businesses we do not understand, and fall into inevitable errors in transacting it for ourselves. Every man then must eschew self-love and follow ever in the steps of his better, undeterred by any shame for his ease.¹²

On this view, it seems that lack of wisdom is not merely or simply ignorance — or even incontinent failure to seek knowledge — but all too often is willful or deliberate *evasion* of truth. So, while this later view of *The Laws* is not obviously inconsistent with the basic Socratic position that not only self-regarding vices such as intemperance, but also such other-regarding shortcomings as injustice and lack of compassion, stem from ignorance, Plato seems to go beyond it (if, that is, some such suggestion cannot be shown to be already implicit in Socrates) in proposing that agents may be actually perversely or viciously *responsible* for such ignorance. The Platonic view is evidently that undue attachment to self as the source of prerationally constructed fantasies and illusions actually obstructs or undermines the motivation to seek truth that might assist clear vision of individual or common human benefit or flourishing. However, the idea that the moral wisdom of virtue cannot be entirely conceived as or reduced to an epistemic virtue seems also appreciated by Aristotle in the early pages of the *Nicomachean Ethics* where he distinguishes the practical aims of moral wisdom — to form character and conduct — from the epistemic aims of theoretical inquiry.

That said, moral wisdom is also clearly regarded by Aristotle as an *intellectual* virtue in the sixth chapter of that book. As such, and as already noted, it is concerned with the rational moral ordering of the affective and appetitive aspects of human nature. However, if it is still appropriate to regard basic Socratic moral wisdom as a kind of freedom from falsehood and delusion, honesty as contributory to this might seem to function as an Aristotelian intellectual virtue at two different but interacting levels: at one level, it would be an epistemic attitude of respect for truth that serves to reinforce the faculties of accurate sense-perception and capacities for sound inquiry; at another, however, it might be a source of truths or principles for the virtuous ordering of feelings, passions, and appetites as prescribed elsewhere in *Nicomachean Ethics*. This would also lend support to the suspicion — implicit if not explicit in Socrates and Plato — that wisdom-conducive honesty has a rather different logical status from other moral virtues: so, for example, while such other *Nicomachean* character traits as courage, temperance, or generosity might be undermined by affective defects or excesses, it is less plausible to suppose that there could be any such unwise *excess* of honesty. All the same, there might seem at least two obstacles to understanding honesty in this moral sense as significantly constitutive of or contributory to Aristotelian practical wisdom. The first of these seems to be exegetical since, though Aristotle does characterize practical wisdom as intellectual, he also seems to deny that such wisdom serves any epistemic or truth-seeking function. But a second problem — rather compounding the first — is that if Aristotelian

12. Plato, *The Laws*, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961), book 5, 731d–732a, p. 1318.

practical wisdom ultimately does have some such grounding in the truth seeking of honesty, then it may not be so clear how Aristotle's claim that moral reason is essentially *practical* differs from or avoids collapse into the more theoretical or epistemic Socratic-Platonic perspectives on moral wisdom that are criticized on this very score by Aristotle himself. In that case, the problem of the insufficiency of wisdom construed as morally "external" *episteme* to motivate moral agency resurfaces, and it becomes difficult to see how agents might not have theoretical knowledge of the good while lacking effective (or affective) attachment to it.

Arguably, however, the second of these difficulties is easily met — and it has some bearing on the first. The clear difference between Aristotle and his predecessors is that for Socrates and Plato the relationship of wisdom to other virtues is both top-down and (to compound metaphors) a one-way street. For Socrates and Plato, wisdom directly dictates the form that courage, temperance, or justice should take and the role of such virtues is somewhat secondary and subservient. Aristotle, on the other hand, insists that moral wisdom and moral virtues are *mutually presupposed*: what, for Aristotle, distinguishes moral wisdom from the mere "cleverness" of other more instrumental forms of practical reasoning is precisely that it is informed by other moral virtues, which are required — so to speak — as the material upon which moral wisdom goes to work. But now, while we may agree with Aristotle that the main aim of practical wisdom is to produce morally virtuous character and conduct, it is not clear how this could be accomplished without some reasonable idea — expressible in terms of something like knowledge or true belief — of what such character and conduct might be. Still, while Aristotle emphasizes that since practical judgment is highly contextualized and particular, what counts as virtuous character and conduct is not readily susceptible to expression in the form of *general* (scientific) rules, he nevertheless provides a rough template of such virtuous character and conduct in the form of the doctrine of the mean. On this view, it is the task of the virtuous agent to judge — in the light of the best available moral experience — what is the appropriate response in this or that circumstance that avoids unacceptable extremes of affective or appetitive deficit or excess.

Hence, while Aristotle agrees with his illustrious philosophical predecessors that agents may err by irrationally surrendering to excessive appetites or passions, he departs from them in holding that it may also be morally untoward to be too *deficient* in appetite or passion. So, on one Aristotelian hand, agents may fall morally short by lacking appropriate affect, passion, or emotion: they can be cruel to others because they are deficient in compassion, sympathy, or empathy; they can fail to right wrongs or rise to the defense of others because they are too apathetic or unmoved to (righteous) indignation or anger; they may go where angels fear to tread because they are insufficiently sensitive to the dangers to which fear would alert them; and so forth. But, on the other hand, they may err morally on account of *excessive* or misplaced appetite, feeling, or passion: they can fall short by failing to support others or to stick to their guns through excess of fear; they may be prone to impatience at best or violence at worst under the sway of anger or jealousy; they may be liable to morally inappropriate action by excessive

sympathy, pity, or generosity that inclines them to indulge the weaknesses of others where a firmer line might be more helpful; and so on.

Here, by the way, it is worth noting that the basic insight of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean is not always well served by common characterization of the latter kinds of moral defect as cases of *excess* of affect or emotion — since, as often said, it sounds odd to speak of people being *too* compassionate, sympathetic, or generous. But there surely are occasions on which we should say that while agents cannot be faulted for feeling some compassion, sympathy, or pity, such sympathy or compassion is nevertheless morally inappropriate or *misplaced*. At all events, while Aristotle may be dubious about the prospect of any useful epistemic statement regarding the appropriateness or otherwise of such moral sentiment in terms of general (scientific) laws or rules, he would seem to hold that we may be right or wrong in our particular judgments of what is appropriate — in terms of good moral character — on this or that occasion. Such observations about the need for ordered and measured emotion of any candidate virtue surely suggest that, without some *epistemic* perspective, we are likely to go morally wrong — not just by taking wrong moral turns, but by failing to *see why* they are the wrong moral turns.

So what may help us to determine that the emotional charge or direction of any given moral or virtuous act is appropriate on this or that occasion and/or assist agents to a realization that this virtuous response or course of action is morally correct or otherwise? Indeed, if emotions and passions are merely *affective* experiences, one might ask how they *could* be right or wrong, true or false? Here, however, it should be clear from the voluminous philosophical literature (which we cannot presently rehearse) that some version of the latter-day “cognitive” account of emotions — which has often drawn on Aristotle¹³ — can hardly be denied. On this view, emotions — as distinct from mere feelings — involve judgments that may clearly also be true or false, or right or wrong: thus, to take a well-worn example, Othello is wrong to be jealous of Desdemona's unfaithfulness because it is *untrue* that Desdemona is unfaithful — and if only Othello could be persuaded that his jealousy is groundless, he would (or should) cease to be jealous. At the same time, it is also true that emotions invariably have not just a cognitive but an affective dimension, that such affect is inherent in, or constitutive of, the prerational sources of human agency and that it is therefore — in cases of pathological dysfunction — something from which agents often find it extremely difficult to disengage themselves. In short, as we have seen from our earlier quotation from Plato's *Laws*, human agents are often deeply attached to their delusions, prejudices, and resentments, regardless of their epistemic credentials. It seems to be such attachment that Iris Murdoch, also drawing on Platonic inspiration, has memorably attributed to the “fat relentless ego.”¹⁴ It is in this respect that honesty as a moral virtue comes surely into its own, operating precisely as a means to epistemic liberation — in ordinary moral life, no less than in the

13. On this, see Kristján Kristjánsson, *Aristotle, Emotions, and Education* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

14. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 52.

more clinical contexts of psychotherapy — from the illusory or delusional egoistic attachments that cloud or undermine wise and effective moral deliberation.

At all events, it is a key point for now that honesty as a moral virtue would appear to operate rather differently from such other moral virtues as temperance, courage, and justice, having — at its core — a significant *epistemic* function. In this regard, it has the words-to-world direction of fit of an epistemic virtue more than the world-to-words direction of fit of other moral virtues. That said, honesty is no less clearly necessary to the successful conduct of moral life. In this light, it is arguable that honesty functions as the indispensable epistemic component of Aristotelian practical wisdom. For while Aristotle often seems to conceive of practical wisdom as a form of reasoning or deliberation primarily concerned with identifying the most effective means to the achievement of certain morally determined ends or goals, such deliberations must lack clear direction in the absence of some “true” or epistemically reliable vision of such goals. In the case of moral deliberation — not least insofar as this is concerned, as Aristotle himself insists, with the development of a morally defensible *character* — this must significantly involve divesting ourselves of the vanities and delusions that Plato in the *Laws* regarded as seriously darkening practical moral counsel. We may know that it is wrong to feel jealousy when we are mistaken about the grounds of such passion, and we may better hit the mean between apathy and uncontrolled violence when we appreciate that this is a mere slight that demands some, but not any extreme, response. Thus, absent the disposition to seek and honor truth that is the soul of honesty as a moral virtue, there could hardly be any other moral virtues; but absent epistemic capacities to recognize truth when we see it, there could in turn hardly be much virtue in honesty.

THE EDUCATIONAL CULTIVATION OF HONESTY

Still, a finer point needs putting on all this in order to see better how the moral virtue of honesty might be educationally promoted. To begin with, we should observe that in terms of the virtue epistemological distinction between reliabilism and responsibilism, the basic form and function of honesty would seem closer to the kind of qualities more commonly associated with the latter than the former. Thus, for example, it seems fairly clear that honesty is neither a faculty of sense perception nor a required intellectual skill or capacity of (this or that) inquiry. On the one hand, we do not come into the world naturally endowed with honesty as we are with reliable sight or hearing; on the other, while the *Nicomachean Ethics* is given to some comparison of virtue with skill acquisition, it is not clear that we acquire honesty by practicing our “honesty skills” as we might become good archers by practicing those of archery. Rather, honesty would appear to be a kind of outlook or attitude more along the lines of intellectual curiosity or open-mindedness than a faculty or skill. To be sure, it would seem that those completely devoid of honesty — in the sense of some basic commitment to the value and importance of knowledge and truth — would be entirely disabled from any epistemic achievement; indeed, it would not make much sense to regard such agents as coming by knowledge even via so-called “epistemic luck” if they cared not a jot whether they had it

or not. Thus, given the basic role of knowledge and truth in any day-to-day human functioning, it is probably safe to say that no human agent could entirely lack honesty understood as some level of commitment to the basic value of some truth over some falsehood; it would therefore seem that no sane agents could *never* care about getting things right rather than wrong in some context or other of human endeavor.

Still, what is of present concern is not such everyday functional honesty, but the more general moral honesty of virtue. Here, however, it is important to observe that such honesty is not always honored in the observance or dishonored in the breach. On the one hand, although virtuous agents would have to regard honesty — as exhibited in truthfulness and aversion to lying or deceit — as always and intrinsically right, they could not be debarred from some deceit or at least dissembling on all occasions. Given the dilemmatic nature of much moral predicament, virtuous agents may well be faced with hard choices — say, in wartime, between truthfulness and protecting lives — in which some deceit may be the lesser of two evils.¹⁵ On the other hand, while other agents might exhibit lifelong and scrupulous avoidance of lying, cheating, or deceit, we might hesitate to describe them as *virtuously* honest if they did so only from inability to break mechanical childhood conditioning or for fear of being caught out and punished. Thus, the sometimes perhaps reluctant truthfulness or refusal to lie of mere moral continence may fall rather short of the full honesty of virtue. So, where some dissembling is not forced upon otherwise honest agents by impossible circumstances, virtuous honesty requires a commitment to the truth, not merely for fair and just dealings with others but for its own personally and morally formative sake.

To be sure, a key point here is that for the moral honesty of virtue there can be no real distinction between recognition of what is required for fair and just dealings with others and appreciation of the intrinsic (personally formative) value of truth, since — as Socrates and Plato both more or less discerned — one cannot be genuinely (rather than accidentally) fair to others without being honest with oneself or honest with oneself in the teeth of unfairness or injustice to others. We are deceitful and exploitative of others only insofar as we are in some significant sense dishonest with ourselves — but in so acting toward others, we also (morally) offend against ourselves. For while such dishonesty may entail some plain epistemic error — failing to see the world as it is — it also seems often a matter, as Plato's *Laws* suggests, of more perversely projecting features upon reality that it does not in fact exhibit. But if we are no less moral victims of such dishonesty than those we exploit, what could the psychological driving force of such self-betrayal be? Moving forward in philosophical time, it seems that one of the earliest and most influential modern moral, political, and educational philosophers to make much of this crucial connection between injustice and such simultaneously projective and morally self-harming features of dishonesty is Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In fact, Rousseau seems especially close to the spirit of Plato's

15. See, for extended discussion of this point, David Carr, "Character and Moral Choice in the Cultivation of Virtue," *Philosophy* 78, no. 304 (2003): 219–232.

Laws when he observes in *The Social Contract* that “those who regard themselves as the masters of others are even greater slaves than they.”¹⁶ Generally, Rousseau seeks to understand the enslavement or other injustice of some to others in terms of a psychopathology of “*amour propre*” — a false and vainglorious conviction that one is superior to others and therefore positioned to treat them as naturally or socially inferior means to one’s own ends. In this regard, Rousseau’s *amour propre* seems a clear philosophical descendent of Plato’s self-love as well as an ancestor of Iris Murdoch’s fat relentless ego.

Rousseau’s conception of justice as dutiful commitment to a rationally disinterested conception of the common good that seeks to eschew such ego attachments has been enormously influential — particularly on Immanuel Kant’s moral deontology and on the attempts of such modern social and political theorists as John Rawls to develop a common principled basis for moral, social, and political cooperation in modern, culturally plural liberal democracies. However, Rousseau’s educational antidote to *amour propre*, as sketched in his main educational treatise *Emile* — notably his radical proposal that pupils should be asocially “educated” by single tutors who abstain from explicit instruction to encourage uncorrupted emergence of the universal sense of justice of which he speaks in *The Social Contract*¹⁷ — has been considerably less influential, at least in the conventional educational contexts of mainstream modern state schooling. Whatever the mileage of this idea (evidently a harbinger of Rawls’s “veil of ignorance”) for the sociopolitical development of cross-cultural principles of fairness and tolerance, the Aristotelian practical wisdom of virtuous character would appear to require rather more in the way of substantial epistemic and/or pedagogical input than anything envisaged in Rousseau’s *Emile*.

Indeed, from this viewpoint, it would seem that neither the highly abstract principles or decision procedures of ethics of duty or utility nor the basic socialization procedures of Aristotle’s moral habituation are likely in and of themselves to assist agents to the knowledge required for virtuous character development. In this regard, we have argued that any and all effective forms of practical moral reasoning — or, at any rate, those forms that have something like Aristotelian moral character as a key goal — would seem to require grounding in an honest knowledge or understanding of self that is also thereby in some substantial theoretical sense *epistemic*. In short, to have moral self-knowledge is to have grasped something that has not just the world-to-words direction of fit of moral rules or prescriptions, but the words-to-world fit of theoretical knowledge. That said, as also already indicated, would-be morally honest agents want or need to know not just those respects in which their characters fall short by virtue of false beliefs, assumptions, or feelings, but at one and the same time to acquire something of the desire for moral improvement. But now — especially recalling

16. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Discourses*, trans. G. D. H. Cole (London: Dent, 1973), 181.

17. *Ibid.*, 210.

Aristotle's apparent insistence that it is not the purpose of the practical wisdom of virtue to discover or establish the general laws or principles of theoretical *episteme* — what might be the form and content of such knowledge?

To be clear, we should here beware of some common philosophical errors regarding this last point. First, it does not follow from Aristotle's denial that practical wisdom is concerned with the discovery or formulation of theoretical truths that (as moral particularists maintain) it could not be *informed by* or in some way grounded in such truths. On the contrary, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle offers a naturalist account of human virtue that is clearly located within a theoretical framework of quasi-biological speculation about the contribution of such character traits as wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice to so-called human flourishing (*eudaemonia*). By the same token, however, it does not follow from Aristotle's distinction between theoretical and practical reason that he would have any time for modern moral distinctions between "is" and "ought" or (what may not be the same thing) fact and value. Again, in light of his aforementioned biological teleology of virtue, it seems clear enough that Aristotle does regard reflection on the natural circumstances of human life as a reasonable starting point for the moral justification of such values and virtues as wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. But, from this viewpoint, might one not precisely turn to such modern "social-scientific" disciplines as anthropology, psychology, and sociology for helpful knowledge and understanding of the nature of moral human character?

However, while it would be a mistake to deny that scientific or other theoretical knowledge might at all usefully inform our moral deliberations, we need also to keep firmly in view Aristotle's insistence on the *practical* point of moral deliberation: that its aim is not the discovery of truth but the formation of *character* and *conduct*. Accordingly, practical wisdom must be concerned not only with *understanding* but with *improving* character — which must also be a matter of the ordering or refinement of the affective basis of moral motivation. Thus, on the Aristotelian view, what the morally virtuous agent (as distinct from incontinent or continent agents) needs to know is how to *feel* in the right way to be properly moved toward the correct virtuously measured response. In this light, to be sure, we might be moved by a historical account of the execution of Mary Queen of Scots, by stories of the holocaust, or by the plight of native populations under colonial oppression. Still, the prime purpose of historical records, social-scientific reports, newspaper or newsreel stories is not to move but to *inform* — whether or not such accounts of worldly injustice do actually move reformers to reform, or other agents to acts of charity. Indeed, it would appear that such information — especially in an age of information overload — often precisely *fails* to move those to whom it is directed to any sort of action at all. Thus, television viewers are nightly bombarded by stories of injustice and oppression around the world often to little or no moral effect.

In that case, what kind of epistemic input — of academic or other kind — might assist development of the affective and motivational dimensions of practical wisdom? In this regard, there may seem to be one educationally familiar vehicle for

the development of moral feeling or sentiment that has also had a time-honored — though often beleaguered — place in the traditional school curriculum. For where a historical account of World War I — including statistical estimates of dead and maimed — may fail to move us, it could be that a Wilfred Owen poem or a Sebastian Faulks novel might. In fact, this is precisely what an Owen poem or Faulks novel sets out to do: not to inform us of the war's casualty statistics, but to help us experience what it might have been like — in all its horror and brutality — to have been there. Likewise, in order to appreciate something of the suffering and oppression of slavery in the nineteenth century Americas, we may be better off reading Isabel Allende's *Island Beneath the Sea* than some historical record — or again, in order to appreciate the horrors of the holocaust, to watch a movie such as *Sophie's Choice*. So, while we should recognize that this may not be its *only* educational or other value, it seems clear enough that it has been one significant purpose of much great art and literature — in the West from the Greek tragic poets through Shakespeare and Marlowe to Austen, Dickens, D.H. Lawrence, and other great modern novelists — to assist some grasp and cultivation of the affective and motivational dimensions of moral wisdom: in short, not just to inform us, but to help us *feel* and/or *care* about the human predicament.

But must not any present claim that creative literature and other art might provide the epistemic basis for critically honest appraisal of our beliefs about ourselves and the world seem surprising — even counterintuitive — in an age in which evidence based scientific inquiry is widely regarded as the benchmark of human knowledge? For many people nowadays it may seem incredible that the fictional stories and themes of novels, plays, and poetry can be other than distractions from the serious business of educational learning — and this view, no doubt, has played its part in the widespread sidelining of literature and other arts in latter-day Western school curricula. Indeed, while Plato seems to have been the first great Western philosopher to recognize the emotional power of poetry and other arts, he was notoriously suspicious of such influence, regarding it as subversive of reason and liable — especially through the poets' stories of the immoral antics of gods and men — to deprave and corrupt. However, present claims about the epistemic potential of literature and the arts for the honesty of self-knowledge are entirely consistent with the metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics of Aristotle, who explicitly held in his *Poetics* that poetry is "something more philosophic and of greater import than history" since it is addressed to matters of more "universal" than "particular" concern.¹⁸

In short, Aristotle was more appreciative than Plato, not only of the indispensable role of affect and emotion in practical wisdom — and of the need for its moral or virtuous refinement and cultivation — but of the power of great poetry to assist, through the process to which he refers in his *Poetics* as *catharsis*, such cultivation. In this light, the point of Euripides' *Medea* is not to encourage imitation of Medea-like atrocities but to move us to some sympathy toward a

18. Aristotle, *Poetics*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. McKeon, 1464.

woman unjustly betrayed and driven to the end of her tether. Likewise, Euripides' *The Trojan Women* sets out to show the Greeks not how wonderful they are by virtue of their victory over the Trojans — as a newsreel of the day might have done — but how cruel and brutal (Greek or other) conquerors can be in the hour of their triumph. Thus, like much other great literature, Euripides' drama holds up a kind of ethical mirror to Greeks and others in which they are invited to submit their values and sentiments to *honest* moral scrutiny. Hence for Aristotle, it is the emotionally engaging stories of the poets that may best serve not just to clarify and nourish the epistemic roots of practical wisdom in the interests of enhanced moral insight, but also to stiffen our resolve to be all that we might be in terms of morally positive character.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that much recent work in aesthetics and moral philosophy has been broadly supportive of such Aristotelian insights into the epistemic and moral value of literature and other arts. For example, on the epistemic status and potential of the arts, James Young's distinction between the "semantic representation" of scientific inquiry and the "illustrative representation" of art and literature has contributed much to the clarification of the figurative or metaphorical more than literal nature of much artistic and aesthetic understanding, meaning, and significance.¹⁹ While this distinction clearly does not alone suffice to show that *all* art has moral significance — which clearly all does not — Alasdair MacIntyre's highly influential Aristotelian defense of story and narrative as the basic logical form of human understanding of moral and other character and agency has also made a timely contribution.²⁰ While MacIntyre's fairly uncompromising neo-idealist or antirealist epistemology needs handling with caution, his contemporary restatement of the indispensability of teleological thinking in moral life and understanding certainly merits wider educational attention than it so far seems to have received. Moreover, application of such mainstream philosophical work to moral education by writers working more directly in the field of educational philosophy has not been entirely lacking.²¹ Still, it has been the more particular aim of this essay to try to show that the promotion of honesty as the epistemic basis of virtuous character might be especially well served by wider educational attention to moral insights afforded by much art and literature.

19. James O. Young, *Art and Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2001).

20. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

21. See, for example, Karen E. Bohlin, *Teaching Character Through Literature: Awakening the Moral Imagination in Secondary Classrooms* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2005). See also David Carr, "Spiritual, Moral and Heroic Virtue: Aristotelian Character in the Arthurian and Grail Narratives," *Journal of Beliefs and Values: Studies in Religion and Education* 24, no. 1 (2003): 15–26; David Carr, "On the Contribution of Arts and Literature to the Educational Cultivation of Moral Virtue, Feeling and Emotion," *Journal of Moral Education* 34, no. 2 (2005): 137–151; and David Carr, "Dangerous Knowledge: On the Epistemic and Moral Significance of Arts in Education," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 44, no. 3 (2010): 1–15.