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# THE PRIMACY OF CIVIC VIRTUE IN ARISTOTLE'S *POLITICS* AND ITS EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

*Kristján Kristjánsson*<sup>12</sup>

**Abstract:** The relationship between character education and civic or citizenship education continues to be marked by tensions, although both forms tend to draw historically on Aristotle's corpus. The aim of this article is to unpack the association between the civic and the moral (characterological) in Aristotle's writings, with a special focus on his *Politics*, and to draw some relevant lessons about how the tensions in question could be alleviated. The article delineates different kinds of primacy in Aristotelian virtue ethics and shows how the civic is (teleo)logically prior to the moral, while secondary in a developmental and analytical sense. A subsidiary aim is to shed light on the relationship between *phronesis* and the civic virtues.

**Keywords:** Aristotle, moral versus civic virtue, political constitutions, civic *phronesis*, character education versus civic education

## I

### Setting the Scene

An old Norse proverb says that relatives make the worst enemies. This proverb captures well the currently tense, tumultuous and some would say 'cancerous'<sup>3</sup> relationship between *character education*, on the one hand, and citizenship or *civic education*, on the other.<sup>4</sup> Family-wise, character education and civic education must be considered close cousins. Firstly, they are both members of the same relatively small 'family' of *values education*. Secondly, they

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Blaine Fowers, Andrew Peterson and David Civil for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

<sup>3</sup> D. Boyd, 'Character Education and Citizenship Education: A Case of a Cancerous Relationship', *Philosophy of Education Yearbook*, 2010, pp. 384–392, p. 384.

<sup>4</sup> The terms 'citizenship education' and 'civic education' tend to be used interchangeably in the literature (although there are exceptions). For convenience of exposition, and to relate the terminology to the focus of the present article on civic virtues, I just use the latter term in what follows.

both trace their historical lineage back to the same philosopher, Aristotle, with character education typically drawing explicitly on themes in his *Nicomachean Ethics*<sup>5</sup> and civic education (commonly, if more obliquely) being influenced by his *Politics*.<sup>6</sup>

As will be spelled out in Section II, Aristotle saw his ethical and political treatises as inseparable parts of one grand, unified project; and he would thus most likely find the current contretemps between character education and civic education injudicious if not wholly incomprehensible. That conception of concordance is not evident, however, in the real world of contemporary (academic) education. Rather, with some notable exceptions,<sup>7</sup> character educationists tend quietly to elide civic education<sup>8</sup> or relegate it to an afterthought,<sup>9</sup> thus creating the impression of assuming a view of the essential primacy of the psycho-moral over the socio-political in the sphere of values education. Proponents of civic education are often more explicit and vocal in their scepticism of the ‘other camp’, accusing character education of an individualistic and reactionary orientation, written off as either politically naïve<sup>10</sup> or socially conservative.<sup>11</sup>

I happen to be as guilty as anyone of perpetuating – or at least failing to put to rest – the view of an inherent tension between character education and civic education. In an early

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<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. T. Irwin (Indianapolis, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham (London, 1944). What I say here applies to those research fields in the West only. In the East, character and civic education trace their ancestry more directly back to Confucius. In the case of character education, this difference may not be crucial for substantive purposes because of the close similarities between Aristotle’s and Confucius’s views of individual virtue development. In the case of civic education, the comparison is complicated by the Confucian assumption that no socio-political exigencies can harm the morally good person: an assumption that Aristotle calls ‘nonsense’ (*NE*, p. 203 [1153b19–21]). Yet this assumption has been widely held in the West also, e.g. by Socrates and the Stoics. See further in J. Yu, *The Ethics of Confucius and Aristotle: Mirrors of Virtue* (London, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. A. Peterson, ‘Character Education, the Individual and the Political’, *Journal of Moral Education*, 49 (2) (2020), pp. 143–157.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. K. Kristjánsson, *Aristotelian Character Education* (London, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. K. Kristjánsson, *Flourishing as the Aim of Education: A Neo-Aristotelian View* (London, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> See J. Suissa, ‘Character Education and the Disappearance of the Political’, *Ethics and Education*, 10 (1) (2015), pp. 105–117.

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. L. Jerome and B. Kisby, *The Rise of Character Education in Britain: Heroes, Dragons and the Myths of Character* (London, 2019). For a rejoinder, see K. Kristjánsson, ‘Recent Attacks on Character Education in a UK Context: A Case of Mistaken Identities?’ *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, in press. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2020.1848151>.

article,<sup>12</sup> I highlighted the dangers of overly politicising values education, and warned against ‘putting the cart before the horse’ by giving civic education developmental and educational priority over character education. It is therefore easy to understand Papastephanou’s reading of this article as aiming to put civic education in its proper place as a mere ‘supplement’ to character education.<sup>13</sup> While I have not changed my view about the ‘cart’ and the ‘horse’ – and I simply continue to follow Aristotle there – I should have complemented my earlier developmental thesis with an explanation of how the civic or social does indeed have another, and arguably more theoretically important, kind of primacy over the characterological in Aristotle’s virtue ethics.<sup>14</sup> I aim to make amends in the present article by unpacking in some detail the relationship between the civic and the moral (characterological) in Aristotle’s corpus, with a special focus on his *Politics*.

But why waste ink on Aristotle’s ancient theory rather than simply analysing character education and civic education, respectively, in their current incarnations? Let me briefly name three reasons. First is the historical one – hinted at above – that a lot of what goes by the name of either character education or civic education in modernity constitutes little more than footnotes to Aristotle. Second, while many character educationists are well versed in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and cite it copiously, references to the *Politics* tend to be sparse – even by civic educationists who claim to draw upon it – and sometimes betray an inadequate grasp of fundamental issues (with the notable exception of Randall Curren<sup>15</sup>). Given that the *Politics* offers much more detail on educational issues than the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and even outlines a whole ‘ideal’ curricular system, it must count as an underused resource in educational circles.

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<sup>12</sup> K. Kristjánsson, ‘Beyond Democratic Justice: A Further Misgiving about Citizenship Education’, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 38 (2) (2004), pp. 207–219.

<sup>13</sup> M. Papastephanou, ‘And That’s Not All: (Sur)faces of Justice in Philosophy of Education’, *Philosophies*, 6 (1) (2021), p. 8. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies6010010>.

<sup>14</sup> The same applies, by implication, to the primacy of civic education over character education, as will be explained in Sections II and V.

<sup>15</sup> R. Curren, *Aristotle on the Necessity of Public Education* (Lanham, 2000).

There are some reasonable explanations for this neglect, however. Compared to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which contains many inspiring passages, the style of the *Politics* is dry, plodding and digressive. Boggled down in the history of 158 past and present (in his day) city-states, most of which have long since been consigned to oblivion, Aristotle is so preoccupied with obscurantist details, as well as reviewing various existing views and counter-views of his contemporaries, that he often forgets to tell readers what his own measured verdict is. This makes the *Politics* a very ‘frustrating’ read.<sup>16</sup>

There is a third reason why a focus on Aristotle in general and his *Politics* in particular is in order. Aristotle offers a unique method for conducting social science. While this method is often referred to as Aristotle’s ‘naturalism’ by those who endorse his take on character and virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, most readers fail to appreciate how radical his method is and how it provides true competition, rather than just complementarity, to standard qualitative and quantitative methods. In comparison with his other works, Aristotle’s *Politics* brings this method into sharper relief and would, if for no other reason, be worthy of a close study by educationists and other social scientists. I say more about that in Section II.

A fortunate implication of Aristotle’s famous naturalistic assumption – about all ethical and political theorising being answerable to empirical research – is that it gives us an opportunity to cast aside his most blatantly outdated empirical hypotheses, for instance about the nature of slaves, women, manual labourers and people incapacitated characterologically by living in calamitous climates (such as Northern Europe and Asia!). We can focus instead on the more general contours of his method and theory and apply those to modern concerns by ‘populating’ them with current knowledge. Kraut does so memorably in his classic and unsurpassed commentary on the *Politics*,<sup>17</sup> and I follow his lead. Moreover, for present

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<sup>16</sup> See e.g. J. Ober, ‘Aristotle’s Natural Democracy’, in R. Kraut and S. Skultety (eds.), *Aristotle’s Politics: Critical Essays* (Lanham, 2005), pp. 223–243, p. 223.

<sup>17</sup> R. Kraut, *Aristotle: Political Philosophy* (Oxford, 2002).

purposes – as the aim is not to give readers a comprehensive overview of the whole work but just to zoom in on specific questions – I can allow myself to go light on textual exegesis and be selective regarding topics covered.

To rehearse, then, the aim of this article is to make sense of the idea of the primacy of the civic in Aristotle's *Politics*. I home in specifically on the difference between *moral* and *civic virtues*, as that question holds the key to understanding correctly the logical order of, and the division of labour between, character and civic education.<sup>18</sup> A subsidiary aim is to shed light on the relationship between *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and the civic virtues. There is renewed interest in *phronesis* in moral educational circles at present,<sup>19</sup> but *phronesis* is discussed, almost exclusively, in the context of adjudicating between (apparently) conflicting moral virtues; not between moral and civic virtues or between civic virtues internally. This is a topic ripe for further exploration.

Here is a quick roadmap of what follows. I begin, in Section II, by explaining Aristotle's method and how it generates his teleological primacy thesis about the civic, in general, and statehood, in particular. I then offer a brief rehearsal of his account of different constitutions, real and ideal, in Section III. This is followed by an analysis of the role of moral and civic

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<sup>18</sup> I talk about moral versus civic virtues in this article because that is the standard terminological way of denoting those two categories of virtue, see e.g. Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, *A Framework for Character Education in Schools* (Birmingham, 2017). Available at: <http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/character-education/Framework%20for%20Character%20Education.pdf>. This terminology is slightly misleading, however, because Aristotle did not have at his disposal any word corresponding to 'moral' in modern English. Anscombe's observation on this is trenchant: 'If someone professes to be expounding Aristotle and talks in a modern fashion about "moral" such-and-such, he must be very imperceptive if he does not constantly feel like someone whose jaws have somehow got out of alignment: the teeth don't come together in a proper bite'. See G.E.M. Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy*, 33 (1) (1958), pp. 1–19, p. 2. Aristotle's distinction was between virtues that have to do with individual character (*ethos*) and those that have to do with social associations in the state. A more accurate terminology would thus be to talk about ethical/characterological versus civic/communal virtues. Moreover, in current psychology, 'moral' is often used interchangeably with 'prosocial', but prosociality is a behaviouristic concept, and Aristotle had no academic interest in a behaviouristic conception of right action, except (perhaps) for persons at an early (uncritical) stage of habituation into virtue.

<sup>19</sup> See e.g. C. Darnell, L. Gulliford, K. Kristjánsson and P. Paris, 'Phronesis and the Knowledge–Action Gap in Moral Psychology and Moral Education: A New Synthesis?' *Human Development*, 62 (3) (2019), pp. 101–129; K. Kristjánsson, 'Twenty-Two Testable Hypotheses about Phronesis', *British Educational Research Journal*, in press. Available at: <https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/berj.3727>.

virtues in actual states and the ideal one – as well as an elaboration of the role of *phronesis*. I end by teasing out some of the educational implications of Aristotle’s theory, in particular insofar as those establish the proper relationship between, and indeed the unconflicted marriage of, character and civic education.<sup>20</sup>

## II

### Method, Teleological Axiology and Civic Primacy

It is almost a platitude to say that Aristotle was an ethical naturalist and more interested in the practical applications of his ethical inquiry than its theoretical contribution. After all, the purpose of such inquiry ‘is not to know what virtue is, but to become good, since otherwise the inquiry would be of no benefit to us’.<sup>21</sup> Naturalism of this kind is often taken to imply what Flanagan calls ‘minimal psychological realism’: that all recommendations posited by moral theory must be attainable for creatures like us.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Aristotle’s naturalism is typically understood – in the contemporary academic climate – as a clarion call for more interdisciplinary research on morality and for supporting theoretical positions by use of social scientific methods, both quantitative and qualitative. While all this is warranted up to a point, it is only half the story and not even the more interesting half.

The first thing to note is that Aristotle never describes himself as conducting ethical theorising. He refers to the subject matter of both the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* as ‘political science’,<sup>23</sup> which in ancient Greek literally meant the science about the state (*polis*).

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<sup>20</sup> Substantively, one could divide the *Politics* into four main parts where the first one is about the teleology of statehood, the second about the pros and cons of existing state constitutions, the third about the ideal state (of ‘our prayers’) and the fourth about the educational curriculum in the ideal state. It so happens that this fourfold division coincides broadly with the division of the current article into the following Sections II–V, although its aim is not to provide a comprehensive overview of the whole *Politics*. I assume a ‘unitarian’ reading of the *Politics*; the days are gone when the third part was considered a relic from an earlier Platonic period in Aristotle’s thought (see Curren, *Aristotle on the Necessity of Public Education*, p. 2).

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle, *NE*, p. 35 [1103b27–29].

<sup>22</sup> O. Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism* (Cambridge, MA, 1991).

<sup>23</sup> Aristotle, *NE*, p. 2 [1094a27–28].

Elsewhere he names this subject matter ‘the philosophy of human affairs’.<sup>24</sup> The important takeaway lesson is that he does not refer to his inquiry anywhere as ‘ethics’ or ‘ethical philosophy’ although both terms were available to him.<sup>25</sup> The most felicitous modern denotation of the kind of study Aristotle claims to be pursuing is simply ‘social science’; hence, he would probably find it puzzling that the *Nicomachean Ethics* is nowadays almost exclusively studied in philosophy departments, not social-science ones, and that virtue ethics is considered a branch of moral philosophy, not a social scientific theory.<sup>26</sup>

A second thing to digest is what we could call Aristotle’s ‘sandwich conception’ of the two books under examination here. They need to be read in conjunction with one another, but in a certain temporal order; for after first reading the *Nicomachean Ethics*, students will be able to ‘grasp better’ the wider political issues, and can thus serviceably proceed towards the *Politics*.<sup>27</sup> Only by reading both books, in the correct order, can one hope to ‘complete the philosophy of human affairs’.<sup>28</sup> So without the grounding in the theory of flourishing and (individual development of) virtue that the *Nicomachean Ethics* provides, students will be impeded in their study of the *Politics*. But, conversely, studying only the *Nicomachean Ethics* precludes a proper understanding of the necessary political dimensions of morality. Thus, ‘the scholarly practice of reading the ethical writings in isolation from the *Politics* has no foundation whatsoever in Aristotle’s thought’.<sup>29</sup> One way to put this is to say that while the *Nicomachean Ethics* has developmental/educational primacy over the *Politics* (and, by implication, character education over civic education), studying it in isolation has little value.

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298 [1181b15].

<sup>25</sup> P.A. Vander Waerdt, ‘The Plan and Intention of Aristotle’s Ethical and Political Writings’, *Illinois Classical Studies*, 16 (1–2) (1991), pp. 231–253, p. 232.

<sup>26</sup> This is why Aristotle would be sympathetic, in principle, to the contemporary appropriation of his theory by social scientists such as the positive psychologists who claim to be pursuing the ‘social science equivalent of virtue ethics’ (C. Peterson and M.E.P. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* [Oxford, 2004], p. 89) – although he would no doubt find fault with some of the assumptions behind their specific take on character strengths and virtues.

<sup>27</sup> Aristotle, *NE*, p. 298 [1181b21–22].

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298 [1181b15].

<sup>29</sup> Vander-Waerdt, ‘The Plan and Intention’, p. 253.



Now, if Aristotle is basically conducting social science in these two works, what is the method that he is applying?<sup>30</sup> Here I want to aver that very few people seem to have grasped how radically different his method is from those that are typically applied in contemporary social science, and what a tall order it would be to persuade most current social scientists of its credibility.<sup>31</sup> Everyone knows about the competing, but sometimes synergic, paradigms of quantitative versus qualitative studies in social science. The former aim for width and comprehensiveness, and the identification of causal (or at least correlational) links, while the latter aim for greater depth and understanding by probing the meaning that agents ascribe to events and activities and interpreting them through a discursive lens.

Although the quantitative–qualitative dichotomy was not available to Aristotle, at least not in the terms in which it is couched nowadays, one could argue that he captures the essence of these two different sources of information/knowledge through his frequent allusions to eliciting the views of both the ‘many’ and the ‘wise’. However, he would find the notion odd that agents can be considered ultimate authorities about the meaning they ascribe to facets of their lives. Even if the researcher understands the agent’s words correctly, that is surely not the end of the story. People lack self-transparency; hence, they can be systematically mistaken about what is truly meaningful. For instance, someone who is really worthy of great things can think herself unworthy of great things: a vice that Aristotle called ‘pusillanimity’<sup>32</sup> but would probably be called a ‘lack of self-esteem’ by moderns. In such cases, the task of the social

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<sup>30</sup> I draw extensively on Salkever in the next few paragraphs, as his is probably the best overall account of Aristotle’s unique brand of social-science methodology: S.G. Salkever, ‘Aristotle’s Social Science’, in Kraut and Skultety (eds.), *Aristotle’s Politics*, pp. 27–64.

<sup>31</sup> There are a few exceptions. Fowers does understand this method well (B. Fowers, *Virtue and Psychology: Pursuing Excellence in Ordinary Practices* [Washington, D.C., 2005]), and so does Flyvbjerg who proposes a whole new comprehensive methodology of doing ‘*phronetic* social science’ along Aristotelian lines (B. Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again* [Cambridge, 2001]). However, neither of these two works has received the attention they deserve, and when they are referred to, theorists typically fail to grasp their radicality. One might expect developmental theorists to be most receptive to Aristotle’s teleology, but that is sadly not the case, although Tomasello comes within a stone’s throw of endorsing the sort of social science that Aristotle advocates (M. Tomasello, *Becoming Human: A Theory of Ontogeny* [Cambridge, MA, 2019]).

<sup>32</sup> Aristotle, *NE*, p. 98 [1123b10–13].

scientist will be to correct the self-deception and identify the relevant objective truth of the matter. More generally speaking, there is no meaningful social-science method that does not criticise and offer guidance. The true aim of social science must be the improvement of socio-political discussion and socio-political activity,<sup>33</sup> not just the systematic gathering of information.<sup>34</sup>

The unique feature that sets Aristotle's social-science method apart can perhaps most felicitously be called *axiological teleology*. It contains two assumptions that would both be rejected by (most) post-Weberian social scientists. The axiological assumption is that social science is an inherently normative enterprise, in the sense of applying (assuming, making, identifying and creating new) value judgements. Aristotle thus completely rejects the Humean fact–value distinction or, perhaps better put, he has no sense of this distinction and writes as if it does not exist.<sup>35</sup> For Aristotle, evaluative judgements are just a sub-category of factual judgements that describe an objective world of evaluations, rather than merely evaluating subjectively an independent objective world of description.

The whole *raison d'être* of social science (or what Aristotle calls 'political science') is to study human flourishing (*eudaimonia*, i.e. how to live well, *eu zēn*), and in such a study, the truth of evaluative judgements (e.g. about physical incapacitation, humiliation, callousness and loneliness being bad for people; but health, virtue, friendship and understanding good) is simply taken as given. For what academic purpose would be served by second-guessing the unanimous verdict of both the many and the wise about these features of human existence? What the student of social science needs is a deep experiential understanding of how those

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Salkever, 'Aristotle's Social Science', p. 48.

<sup>34</sup> Aristotle would probably acknowledge that there can be social scientists who are mainly in the business of collecting data. However, if that data gathering is not to be written off as completely haphazard and otiose, it must be done in the light of some hypothesis which itself is evaluative, critical and aims at offering guidance. Normativity will thus enter any proper social scientific study at some juncture.

<sup>35</sup> Rejecting the fact–value distinction does not necessarily imply rejecting the is–ought distinction (the other famous Humean distinction) also. However, Aristotle is unaware of either distinction and disregards both equally.

features play out in different contexts and different individuals, just as a doctor assesses the health of an individual patient rather than some average patient.<sup>36</sup> What the student does not need, however, is anti-realism or cynicism about the nature of goodness as such. If one refuses to accept the experientially grounded claim that a human being's happiest life, both as an individual and as a citizen, is a life of virtue, accompanied with those enjoyments which virtue usually procures,<sup>37</sup> one is, by Aristotle's lights, not just a moral cynic but a bad social scientist.

This axiology of goodness is not only grounded in simple empirical observations about human affairs but in a much deeper probing into the different 'causes' steering the existence and development of all well-ordered natural beings. One of those is the final cause (the *telos*) – the ideal realisation to which the being is naturally drawn. So, for example, a plant seed has a nature inherent to it, and this nature determines its teleological ends. The plant is a good plant insofar as it reaches these ends and bad insofar as it does not. The general idea here is that goodness is thought of in terms of fulfilment, and this fulfilment is one of inherent potential reaching its teleological end, its best manifestation.<sup>38</sup> The *telos* of the human person is an active state of moral maturity, health and happiness, just as the *telos* of the human group is a well-ordered state. This is, for Aristotle, not an esoteric metaphysical claim but simply a naturalist one, derived from observing how two natural entities (a human person and a human group) best develop and reach a mature, homeostatic condition. He would probably have found Enlightenment anti-teleological catechisms challenging theoretically but, in a practical sense, totally beside the point. A doctor who does not operate with a clear sense of the *telos* of human health, or a teacher who has no vision of the *telos* of good education, are simply bad professionals, unable to do their jobs well; the same, *mutatis mutandis*, applies to the social scientist who refuses to acknowledge an objective sense of the human good.

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<sup>36</sup> Aristotle, *NE*, p. 297 [1181b3–5].

<sup>37</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, p. 535 [1323b1–5].

<sup>38</sup> See e.g. B. Page, 'Power-ing Up Neo-Aristotelian Natural Goodness', *Philosophical Studies*, in press. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-021-01624-1>.

It must be remembered that when Aristotle is edifying students in ‘political science’ through his writings, these are not budding disinterested academics – as there were no research institutions of social science around – but rather future statesmen (legislators). So the method of axiological teleology that I have been describing is not first and foremost the incarnation of an academic methodology (although Aristotle would probably say same to social science students today) but rather a *modus operandi* of competent statecraft. This explains the frequent medical analogies upon which Aristotle draws and his allusions to the ‘political scientist’ (*qua* practitioner in politics) as a *doctor*. Just as the medical doctor operates with a clear axiology of biological goodness and a teleology of health in order to cure a patient, the ‘state doctor’ operates with an axiology of societal goodness and a teleology of well-ordered statehood to improve the lives of the citizens. In modern parlance, the statesman is an ‘action researcher’, applying certain methodological assumptions and testing hypotheses based on those, and that the same time honing experientially his intellectual *phronesis*, enabling him to make good decisions in difficult circumstances.

The medical analogy is helpful to illuminate another feature of Aristotle’s brand of social science: his pragmatic *realism* (this time in a political rather than an ontological sense). Two medical doctors who share the same axiological teleology about psycho-physical goodness and health can still end up giving different advice to a patient. One of the doctors may favour radical interventions for cure while the other is more cautious. Aristotle’s political advice tends to fall into to the latter category; he would have endorsed the famous policy of German statesman Willy Brandt: *die Politik der kleinen Schritte*. This small-steps approach has probably more to do with Aristotle’s own personal constitution than any theoretical leanings, as well (perhaps) as a once-bitten-twice-shy reaction to the idealistic radicalism of

his mentors Plato and Socrates.<sup>39</sup> Although far from being a quietist in the Stoic or Daoist mould, he has a deep antipathy to conflict, be it psychological or social, and generally favours a bad order to no order at all (as will be exemplified in Section III).

It would be misleading to characterise this penchant unreservedly as *conservatism*; after all Aristotle says that what all seek is not the ‘customary’ but the ‘good’,<sup>40</sup> and he allows himself to philosophise about an ideal state with an ideal educational system. The reason lies rather in his strong psycho-moral leanings towards moderation (namely, the ‘golden mean’ in everything) and his pragmatic distrust of radical social engineering. Another related reason may be his narrow application of his own naturalistic method. True, he assumes that all theorising about the human good is answerable to empirical research – which is precisely the assumption that draws some contemporary social scientists towards virtue ethics.<sup>41</sup> However, at the same time, he takes it for granted that existing city-states and those that preceded them have already yielded sufficient evidence of all possible experiments in living.<sup>42</sup> He does not take into account the fact that future states might reveal new facts about human associations that would perhaps motivate a radical rethink of statecraft – as well as of the best execution of both character and civic education.

All in all, what I have been describing so far in this section constitutes nothing less than a ‘third way’ of doing social science, in addition to standard quantitative and qualitative ways: ‘*phronetic* social science’<sup>43</sup>, grounded in a certain axiological teleology. It is now time to explore how Aristotle applies it to the relationship between the moral and civic, and what its bearings are for the currently ‘tense’ relationship between character and civic education.

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<sup>39</sup> In a clear dig at Socrates (although not named), Aristotle says: ‘Of those who have put forward views about politics, some have taken no part in any political activities whatever but have passed their whole life as private citizens’: *Politics*, p. 165 [1273b27–29].

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129 [1269a3–4].

<sup>41</sup> See e.g. Fowers, *Virtue and Psychology*.

<sup>42</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, p. 93 [1264a4–7].

<sup>43</sup> Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter*.

This whole trajectory of thought here starts with the premise that the human being is a ‘political animal’, repeated at various junctures in the *Politics*.<sup>44</sup> This has a double meaning in ancient Greek: referring generally to the sociable nature of human beings and their inclination to live in communities, but also, more specifically, to this communitarian instinct being best satisfied within the state (*polis*).<sup>45</sup> At the outset of the *Politics*, Aristotle charts a social teleology of human associations from the family, through the village (clan, tribe) and towards the state. Temporally (historically), forms of associations have followed this order, but teleologically, the state is ‘prior by nature’ to the previous forms (not to mention to the individual person) in the sense of being closer to their ideal fulfilment and also in the sense in which the whole must necessarily be prior to the parts.<sup>46</sup>

Aristotle is aware of the ambiguities of the terms ‘prior to’ and ‘primacy’.<sup>47</sup> It is one thing to be prior in existence and/or development, another thing to be analytically prior (in terms of explanation of composition) and yet another to be prior in nature and substance, namely what I call ‘teleologically prior’.<sup>48</sup> When we say that *A* is logically prior to *B*, it can mean either analytically prior or teleologically prior. Thus, when I talked about the ‘logical order of morality and politics’ in an earlier article, and by implication the logical order of character versus citizenship education,<sup>49</sup> I may have been understood to be talking about priority in an all-inclusive sense.<sup>50</sup> However, insofar as I was setting out an Aristotelian position, this is a misunderstanding.

Although Aristotle is preoccupied in the *Politics* with ‘primacy’ in the context of forms of human communities, it is perhaps easiest to exemplify his general thesis with respect to

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<sup>44</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, e.g. p. 11 [1253a5–8]; also in *NE*, p. 15 [1097b11].

<sup>45</sup> In the former sense, human beings share this inclination with bees and ants, but obviously not in the latter sense.

<sup>46</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, p. 11 [1253a19–21].

<sup>47</sup> See Kraut, *Aristotle*, pp. 256–273.

<sup>48</sup> There are other possible types of priority relevant here, for example, motivational priority, as exemplified presently, although those are not explicitly mentioned by Aristotle himself.

<sup>49</sup> Kristjánsson, ‘Beyond Democratic Justice’, p. 216.

<sup>50</sup> See e.g. Papastephanou, ‘And That’s Not All’.

*personal justice* (as typically taught within character education) versus *social justice* (as emphasised in civic education). According to an Aristotelian analysis, personal justice is *developmentally prior* to social justice: it develops in personal encounters in the family before the child knows how to apply it to wider social contexts. It is also *motivationally prior*, in the sense that a person who has not learned aversion to unfairness as a child will hardly learn to internalise later, somehow out of the blue, a motivation towards countering wider societal injustice. Third, it is *analytically prior*, in the sense, for example, that whereas it is intelligible to criticise theories of social justice for not accounting for the simple sense of fairness that children begin to develop already at the pre-school level,<sup>51</sup> it would be absurd to criticise a 6-year old child's conception of justice as desert for not conforming to, say, a Rawlsian theory of social justice.<sup>52</sup> None of this changes the fact, however, that social justice has primacy over personal justice in another logical sense, which I have above called 'teleological'. Social justice is a more mature, more fully developed conception, characterising a more fulfilled life form, than just close personal justice encounters within a small in-group. Analogously, civic education has primacy over character education in this teleological sense. It signals the further development of human excellences towards capacities that are prior in the order of fulfilment (although secondary in a developmental sense).

The distinctions drawn in the preceding paragraph are more than just pedantic conceptual ones. They have significant educational and moral/political implications. First, *educationally*, they mean that although character education must, in general, precede civic education, the latter has primacy in the (teleological) sense that is given pride of place in Aristotle's virtue ethics. Hence, not offering some sort of civic education in the wake of

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. W. Damon, 'The Development of Justice and Self-Interest during Childhood', in M.J. Lerner and S.C. Lerner (eds.), *The Justice Motive in Social Behavior* (New York, 1981), pp. 57–72.

<sup>52</sup> Indeed, this is precisely how Rawls's theory has often been criticised: namely, for not accommodating people's pre-institutional sense of desert or deservingness, arguably underlying analytically all later developed and more complicated/multi-faceted conceptions of justice.

character education points to a significant deprivation of educational opportunities for growth. Second, *morally* and *politically*, the thesis about the primacy of the civic over the moral (characterological) – again in the sense that matters most to Aristotle – is nothing less than the pillar of what is sometimes referred to, slightly misleadingly, as his ‘collectivism’: the idea that ‘if a choice must be made between the good of a single individual and the good of the other members of the community, the latter alternative should be selected’.<sup>53</sup>

It would take me too far afield to elaborate further upon those educational and moral implications here; some of them reappear at later junctures in this article. What stands out at the end of this section, hopefully, is the unreasonableness of claims about Aristotelian character education signalling a conservative form of individualism or ‘the disappearance of the political’,<sup>54</sup> at least insofar as the character education under scrutiny is Aristotelian in more than name only.

### III

#### Interlude: Actual Constitutions and the Ideal State

The study of past and present city-states (*poleis*) in Greece and elsewhere, with the aim of eliciting the pros and cons of different kinds of ‘constitutions’ (meaning forms of government, not charters of foundational laws), takes up the largest part of the *Politics*. I will treat this topic

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<sup>53</sup> Kraut, *Aristotle*, p. 269. Aristotle puts it in the terms that the citizen does not belong to himself but rather to the state, because each individual is part of the state (*Politics*, pp. 635–636 [1337a27–29]). That said, various other things Aristotle says about the nature of individual *phronetic* choice and the individualisation of virtue in the *NE*, as well as the human propensity to cherish what is one’s own, including private property, in the *Politics* (e.g. p. 83 [1262b18–25]), differentiate his virtue ethics from positions that tend to be characterised as ‘collectivist’, ‘authoritarian’ or even ‘totalitarian’ in modernity (see e.g. J.A. Swanson, *The Public and the Private in Aristotle’s Political Philosophy* [Ithaca, 1992], pp. 1–8). Unfortunately, the capacity to discuss constructively many of the issues that Aristotle is interested in regarding conflicts between the individual and common good has been undermined in current educational discourse. For Aristotle, social justice *ex hypothesi* aims at the common good. Despite the omnipresence of the term ‘social justice’ in current educational discourse, postmodern and other relativistic assumptions have robbed the foundational concept of ‘the common good’ of any clear meaning, see J. Arthur, K. Kristjánsson and C. Vogler, ‘Seeking the Common Good in Education through a Positive Conception of Social Justice’, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 69 (1) (2021), pp. 101–117.

<sup>54</sup> Jerome and Kisby, *The Rise of Character Education in Britain*; Suissa, ‘Character Education and the Disappearance of the Political’.



very cursorily here, however, for two reasons. First, this is by far the best known part of Aristotle’s political writings, and it suffices to have done an elementary A-level (senior high-school) course in politics to have a smattering of knowledge about it. Second, this topic is mostly tangential to the remit of the present article, which is to explore the relationship between the civic and the moral in the field of Aristotle’s virtue ethics and the precise role that *phronesis* plays with respect to civic virtue. In this section, which I call an ‘Interlude’, I therefore rehearse only those aspects of Aristotle’s account of real and ideal constitutions that will have a bearing on my discussion in the subsequent sections.

Famously, Aristotle makes a distinction between ‘correct’ (*orthai*) and ‘erroneous’ or ‘flawed’ (*hēmartēmenai*) constitutions. ‘Correct’ here means ‘essentially just’ (although not ideally perfect), whereas ‘erroneous’ means ‘essentially unjust’ (although not necessarily base beyond redemption). ‘Erroneous’ is sometimes translated as ‘perverted’, which is apt because those forms are deviant/degenerative versions of the ‘correct’ ones and, teleologically, contrary to the ideally fulfilled nature of civic associations. The distinction between the two forms is deceptively simple: correct constitutions aim at the common good (i.e. serve the interests of the ruled) whereas the erroneous ones serve the interests of the ruler(s) only.<sup>55</sup> Depending on whether the ruler are many, few or just one, we end up with this well-known list of options:

Table 1: Constitutions (forms of government) in Aristotle’s *Politics*

Ruled by:	For the sake of the common good ('correct' forms):	For the sake of the ruler(s) only ('erroneous' forms):
One	KINGDOM	TYRANNY
Few	ARISTOCRACY	OLIGARCHY
Many	POLITY	DEMOCRACY

<sup>55</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, p. 205 [1279a17–29].

Aristotle's examples of real constitutions exemplifying the two different forms and sub-forms are enlightening, if somewhat tortuous.<sup>56</sup> However, our paragon of clarity becomes uncharacteristically cryptic when it comes to rank-ordering the correct and erroneous forms. He seems to think that kingdom is in principle the best of the 'correct' forms if a benevolent and *phronetic* enough ruler (with good enough sons to match, as successors) can be found; however, he struggles to find real-life examples of this. Hence, aristocracy (as in Sparta and Carthage) is probably the most decent real-life option, followed by polity (as in Syracuse and Mali), although both contain potential seeds of degeneration within them. The same applies to the perversions; Aristotle is not entirely unambiguous on which of those is the worst – apparently tyranny, with oligarchy more pathological than democracy although the latter is bad enough, especially because of its proneness to demagoguery.<sup>57</sup>

Before turning to Aristotle's ideal state, I will just add a couple of quick observations that matter for what follows. First, Aristotle's aversion to conflict shines through in his assumption that even the worst of pervert constitutions is marginally better than no constitution – namely anarchy – and that efforts can and need to be made within all existing constitutions, good or bad, to make them gradually better.<sup>58</sup> While not going in a Hobbesian direction in legitimising state power, Aristotle is no believer in revolutions. He is basically applying his teleology of the civic here (recall Section II). In order to reach its fulfilment *qua* statehood, the state must, first, be preserved and, second, improved from within. Even when there is no hope of turning a state's constitution into a correct form, its 'health' can at least be brought to a

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<sup>56</sup> There were more than 1000 city-states in ancient Greece, but most of them had less than 1000 inhabitants, functioning more like villages than states. Aristotle was therefore limited when it came to states large enough (such as Athens) to matter for his analysis, and even Athens had the population only of a modern-sized large town.

<sup>57</sup> In light of the positive modern connotations of the word 'democracy', it might be helpful to coin a new term, like 'rabblecracy', for the perverted form (as Aristotle specifies it as government in the hands of the meanest rabble: the uncouth *dêmos*), reserving the term 'democracy' rather for what he calls 'polity'. However, since Aristotle uses the standard Greek term for 'democracy' and simply happens to have a very low opinion of this form of government, I stick to the traditional translation here.

<sup>58</sup> For a different take on Aristotle and anarchy, see D. Keyt, 'Aristotle and Anarchism', in Kraut and Skultety, (eds.), *Aristotle's Politics*, pp. 203–222.

bearable level (i.e. some modicum of justice), as a doctor would do for a patient in palliative care. Second, Aristotle's pessimism about radical constitutional change mirrors his pessimism of moral transformation in an individual who has not been brought up in good habits. The effects of the antecedent circumstances of bad upbringing, or living under a perverted constitution, cannot be undone, because of the intractability of altering 'by argument what has long been absorbed by habit'. For a person in such a condition 'would not even listen to an argument turning him away, or comprehend it [if he did listen]; and in that state how could he be persuaded to change?'<sup>59</sup> A bad politico-legal order, just like bad upbringing, compromises, stifles and stunts.

Given Aristotle's antipathy to utopian thinking, Platonic and otherwise, it is somewhat remarkable that he devotes Books VII and VIII of the *Politics* to illustrating the ideal of a state that that has never existed but we can still 'pray for' (*kat' euchēn*).<sup>60</sup> However, Aristotle goes to some lengths to show that his ideal state is not unrealistically utopian but rather a viable option, subject to strict empirical constraints.<sup>61</sup> It would have to be set up in a new place, preferably a coastal region, exclusively by a large group of unique *phronimoi* who decided to move from an existing *polis* and establish an autonomous colony elsewhere.<sup>62</sup>

The ideal state described by Aristotle – and which he must take to represent the final end of the natural teleology of statehood if that teleology ever succeeds in overcoming human imperfections and reaching its fulfilment – seems to combine the best of both aristocracy and the unpolluted form of what we would probably want to call 'democracy' but he called 'polity'. It is *aristocratic* in the sense that it is ruled by a select (namely self-selected) and well-off group

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<sup>59</sup> Aristotle, *NE*, p. 292 [1179b11–31].

<sup>60</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, p. 553 [1325b37]; I alter the translation slightly.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 553 [1325b39]. According to Wolbert et al.'s distinction between 'utopian idealisation' and 'realistic idealism', Aristotle's ideal state clearly falls into the latter category, see L.S. Wolbert, D. de Ruyter and A. Schinkel, 'What Kind of Theory Should Theory on Education for Human Flourishing Be?', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 67 (1) (2019), pp. 25–39.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. the fond hope, nourished at the end of MacIntyre's (otherwise pessimistic) work, of virtuous agents setting up socially isolated 'enclaves' or retreats of virtuous living: A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, 1981).

of men of outstanding character; it is *democratic* in the sense that this group happens to include potentially all (male, permanent) residents of the new immigrant state, so that everyone has the option of – and capacity for – both ruling and being ruled by turns. Ober draws considerable mileage from the fact that the decision processes in the ideal state seem to be democratic and that Aristotle’s teleology of statehood thus seems to point towards some sort of fairly egalitarian ‘natural democracy’.<sup>63</sup> Aristotle does not say what happens in this state if the *phronimoi* who happen to be ruling at a given time do not agree about a political decision, but Kraut argues that he must assume that, in such cases, decisions will be made by majority voting – another nod to a democratic process.<sup>64</sup>

I say more about the ideal state when analysing ideally combined moral and civic virtue at the end of Section IV. It is also relevant to the educational discussion in Section V, as the educational system described by Aristotle is predicated upon the existence of the ideal state.<sup>65</sup>

#### IV

##### **Moral and Civic Virtue, and the Role of *Phronesis***

The current lack of rapport between character and civic education has led to a paucity of engagement with various conceptual and theoretical issues that would illuminate the true areas of disagreement – if any – between these two forms of values education. An obvious point of departure is to try to understand their respective understandings of the relationship between *moral* (ethical, i.e. related to character, on Aristotle’s understanding) and *civic* virtue. Inasmuch as civic educationists avail themselves of virtue talk at all, they highlight the civic virtues or other kinds of virtues applied to civic purposes,<sup>66</sup> while character educationists are most

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<sup>63</sup> Ober, ‘Aristotle’s Natural Democracy’.

<sup>64</sup> Kraut, *Aristotle*, p. 233.

<sup>65</sup> Although not as detailed about life in the ideal state as Plato is about life in his, Aristotle still provides considerable guidance, e.g. about the proper age for getting married for a woman being eighteen, for a man thirty-seven (*Politics*, p. 621 [1335a28–30]).

<sup>66</sup> See Peterson, ‘Character Education, the Individual and the Political’.

interested in the development of the moral virtues, although they typically mention the civic virtues along with other virtue types.<sup>67</sup> What, for example, is the relationship between personal justice as a moral virtue and social justice as a civic virtue?

The first port of call will, as previously, be Aristotle, if only because of the historical provenance of both forms of values education. However, regarding the question about the two types of justice, Aristotle leads us, for once, into a blind alley. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle carefully analysed four justice-related (or, more specifically, desert-based) virtuous emotions: pain at another's undeserved bad or good fortune and pleasure at another's deserved bad or good fortune.<sup>68</sup> When he then fleshes out justice as a personal character virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, one expects him to draw on this discussion for the standard emotional component of the virtue. However, he says nothing there about its desert-basis nor indeed about its emotional concomitant(s). Indeed, the discussion of justice, while longer than of any other virtue apart from friendship, is uncharacteristically unclear and unpersuasive. Basically, Aristotle identifies two kinds of justice as a moral virtue where the first one seems to amount to little more than law-abidingness, for 'whatever is lawful is in some way just'.<sup>69</sup> But hold on: surely there are unjust laws!<sup>70</sup> The second kind of moral justice is about equality in the spheres of the distributive, the corrective and the reciprocal. But the examples he gives of this are lacking in cohesion. All in all, as Kraut notes, the long section on the moral virtue of justice seems to constitute an eclectic mixture of ill-assorted elements without a systematic structure.<sup>71</sup> To pile on the agony, when it comes to the *Politics*, Aristotle mostly discusses social justice

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<sup>67</sup> Jubilee Centre, *Framework*.

<sup>68</sup> See overview and references in K. Kristjánsson, *Justice and Desert-Based Emotions* (Aldershot, 2007). The first two of those emotions have obvious designators in modern English and ancient Greek: compassion (*eleos*) and righteous indignation (*nemesis*); the second two have not.

<sup>69</sup> Aristotle, *NE*, p. 118 [1129b11–14].

<sup>70</sup> Aristotle acknowledges this in various places, both directly and indirectly (see e.g. *Politics*, pp. 129; 229–230 [1268b38–1269a3; 1282a41–b13]); cf. Kraut, *Aristotle*, p. 104.

<sup>71</sup> Kraut, *Aristotle*, p. 99.

without forging any logical links either to the account in the *Nicomachean Ethics* or the emotion analysis in the *Rhetoric*.

To mend matters, however, Aristotle does address the question of the relationship between moral and civic virtue head-on in the *Politics*, although he does so without invoking specifically his earlier accounts of the moral virtue of justice. Some of what he says is direct and unambiguous; other claims, such as about the four levels of civic virtue that I introduce presently, have to be teased out more indirectly from the text (in a way that has not been done previously). To begin with the direct and unambiguous claims, Aristotle asserts that moral and civic virtue, while overlapping, do not coincide except in the ideal state.<sup>72</sup> In that state, civic virtue is nothing but moral virtue applied to wider societal context, and there is no possible conflict between the moral and the civic. In non-ideal constitutions, however, be those of the ‘correct’ or ‘erroneous’ forms, civic virtues go beyond – and may even in some cases appear to conflict with – moral virtue. The main reason for this discrepancy is the fact that civic virtues are more context-sensitive and relative than moral virtues. Before explaining why this is the case, let us remember that one of the most conspicuous features of Aristotle’s theory of moral virtue is how context-sensitive and individualised it is. Magnificence is a virtue for people blessed with unusually abundant material resources but not for ordinary folks who can merely be generous. Temperance in eating is not the same for Milo the athlete as for the novice athlete, because what is intermediate in virtue is relative to the individual, ‘not in the object’.<sup>73</sup> And, from an educational perspective, a boxing instructor will not ‘impose the same way of fighting on everyone’.<sup>74</sup>

However, even this context-sensitivity of moral virtue pales in comparison with the contextual and cultural sensitivity of civic virtue. Aristotle’s idea here seems to be that the

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<sup>72</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, p. 273 [1288a40–42].

<sup>73</sup> Aristotle, *NE*, p. 43 [1106b1–7].

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 295 [1180b9–11].

sphere where most moral virtues are played out is fairly uniform across cultures. Most people interact personally with family, friends, workmates and casual strangers in ways that call for the same sort of moral virtues of honesty, compassion, agreeableness, etc.; and ‘in our travels we can see how every human being is akin [. . .] to a human being’.<sup>75</sup> There are, however, two sorts of reasons why the civic virtues will need to function differently: intra-constitutional and inter-constitutional.<sup>76</sup> The *intra-constitutional* reason is that there is substantial division of labour within the civic sphere, just as in the different tasks that different sailors perform on a ship.<sup>77</sup> Thus, the civic virtues of the person in charge of state finances will be radically different from those of the army general or the person overseeing agricultural matters – not to mention the more general differences between the virtues of rulers and the ruled.

However – and here is the *inter-constitutional* reason – there are not only different tasks on the same ‘ship’; there are also quite distinct types of ‘ships’ around: recall the account of all the discrete constitutions. The civic virtues of a person (a ruler or a citizen) in a polity will differ from the ones of a person in an aristocracy, for example. Aristotle is quite explicit here: ‘If [...] there are various forms of constitution, it is clear that there cannot be one single goodness [virtue] which is the perfect goodness of the good citizen’.<sup>78</sup> So, social justice as a virtue will vary, relative to constitutions, in ways that personal justice will not.<sup>79</sup> I say more later about how this discrepancy disappears in the ideal state.

Although Aristotle is transparent in advancing and justifying the thesis of the separation of moral and civic virtues in actual constitutions, nowhere does he produce a comprehensive specification of what civic virtue is (apart from truisms about its aiming at the common good),

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208 [1155a20–22].

<sup>76</sup> See e.g. A. Rosler, ‘Civic Virtue: Citizenship, Ostracism, and War’, in M. Deslauriers and P. Destrée (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle’s Politics* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 144–175.

<sup>77</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, p. 187 [1276b20–25].

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187 [1276b32–36].

<sup>79</sup> One way to make sense of this claim regarding the simpler understanding of personal justice *qua* lawfulness is to say that the virtue of abiding by the law is essentially the same everywhere, in the sense of requiring the same state of law-abiding character; however, socially, it will manifest itself differently, having to do with different legal norms under different legislations.

and how that specification will differ from the one given for moral virtue in general and discrete moral virtues in particular in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as well as from that of the various virtuous emotions (while not full-blown virtues) in the *Rhetoric*. In what follows, I propose to elicit from Aristotle's *Politics* an account of four functional levels of civic virtue, ranging from the most rudimentary to the most advanced.

*Level 1 Civic Virtue: Uncritical Law-Abidingness.* According to Aristotle, most people find themselves somewhere between the levels of incontinence (moral awareness but lack of self-control) and continence (self-control).<sup>80</sup> In other words, mainly because of defective upbringing, most people do not even reach the level of habituated moral virtue, let alone *phronetic* (i.e. *phronesis*-guided) moral virtue. Aristotle believes, however, that virtually every citizen in a state can learn to exhibit civic virtue – for ‘all ought to possess the goodness [virtue] of a good citizen’<sup>81</sup> – albeit at a fairly low level. It is clear that he relinquishes here the crucial demand made upon moral virtue that the agent enjoys its actualisation; it suffices that the agent forces herself to act civically; hence, civic virtue at this lowest level is more akin to continence in the sphere of moral virtue.<sup>82</sup> The low-level civic virtue that Aristotle is talking about here, as available for everyone, is evidently just law-abidingness. The solution to the puzzle of why merely acting lawfully is a civic virtue, even if this is done mindlessly and without relishing it – and even when the law may not be just – lies again in Aristotle's deep-seated fear of anarchy.<sup>83</sup> A bad law is better than no law; for at least if there is a law, there will be processes in place to improve it (see Level 2 Civic Virtue), which is not the case in a state of utter

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<sup>80</sup> Aristotle, *NE*, p. 190 [1150a15].

<sup>81</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, p. 189 [1277a2–4].

<sup>82</sup> Linn cleverly argues that the lower demands on virtue in the *Politics* may make Aristotle immune to the common accusation that he sets the bar for virtue too high. That said, since Aristotle is mainly talking about specifically civic virtues and civic friendships in the *Politics*, this may not necessarily save him from complaints lodged against his theory of moral virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. See M. Linn, ‘Aristotle on Actual Virtue and Ordinary People’, *Journal of Value Inquiry*, in press. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10790-020-09789-4>.

<sup>83</sup> It is also possible that Aristotle is here working implicitly on the (controversial) Socratic premise that deciding to continue to live in a state, and not to emigrate, somehow commits you to consider its laws just. Cf. Curren, *Aristotle on the Necessity of Public Education*, pp. 30–32.



lawlessness.<sup>84</sup> The next worst thing after anarchy is that citizens consider the state their enemy;<sup>85</sup> but being willing to follow its laws indicates that this is not the case. Aristotle bolsters his case with an army analogy; one cannot command cavalry well without having first learned to obey as a trooper.<sup>86</sup>

To clarify, then, Level 1 type of civic virtue is a virtue for citizens (not rulers) in both ‘correct’ and ‘erroneous’ states. It is simply about preserving the constitution and preventing it from falling into anarchy. It does not require the same mindset or intellectual capacity as moral virtue, and it can even at times, in principle, seem to contradict moral virtue (which would then call for Level 2 Civic Virtue, as we see presently). To take a modern example, a teenager may have come to the reasoned conclusion that a law prohibiting the personal use of a recreational drug like cannabis is unjust; his parents may agree with him, but it is nevertheless incumbent on the parents to persuade their child to obey the law and thereby execute a civic virtue. In a certain sense, then, education for Level 1 civic virtue is ‘training in conformity’.<sup>87</sup>

*Level 2 Civic Virtue: Critical Law-Abidingness.* All the above claims about lawfulness as a civic virtue notwithstanding, once the citizens have contributed to the preservation of the constitution, they also need to try to improve it from within. This will be the case, in particular, when a specific law is considered unjust, for example when it clashes with the equity principles of moral justice. Aristotle is not explicit here; Level 2 civic virtue needs to be drawn out by implication from his texts. *Criticality*, so to speak, shambles on to the stage rather than making a graceful entrance. The reason for this is that Aristotle is still dealing with ordinary citizens, most of whom are not even budding, let alone full-blown, *phronimoi*. Some of those are,

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<sup>84</sup> Aristotle seems to predicate his view on lawfulness being a civic virtue, even in ‘erroneous’ constitutions, on the premise that there is at least some legal structure at work there, albeit less than just. He would evidently not extend this requirement to obeying outrageous and evil commands by, say, a tinpot tyrant ruling on his whims (see e.g. *Politics*, pp. 459; 463–464 [1313a40–41; 1314a5–9]), as the constitution has then already sunk into complete lawlessness anyway; cf. Kraut, *Aristotle*, p. 381.

<sup>85</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, p. 509 [1320a14–17].

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193 [1277b7–16].

<sup>87</sup> Curren, *Aristotle on the Necessity of Public Education*, p. 98.

however, capable of holding ‘right opinion’ (*doxa alēthēs*) about socio-moral issues, although they are not in command of the bigger picture that the overarching meta-virtue of *phronesis* provides.<sup>88</sup> Their condition is one in which they possess at best habituated moral virtue that has not yet been *phronesis*-infused. While incapable of making rational overall judgements about states of affairs, citizens at this stage are able to spot individual instances of unjust laws; in which case it is incumbent on them as good citizens to execute civic virtue by trying to have those laws amended.<sup>89</sup> Aristotle even enters into cost-benefit analysis in considering whether the costs of repealing a bad law may outweigh the benefits, but the main point still remains that ‘it is proper for some laws sometimes to be altered’.<sup>90</sup>

To sum up, then, Level 2 Civic Virtue operates in both ‘correct’ and ‘erroneous’ constitutions; it involves critical interventions by citizens to try to moderate the defects of the legal system. In many cases, this means making the law compatible with moral virtues. Yet most of the citizens in question, who are meant to execute this level of civic virtue, do not possess *phronesis*; hence their point of view will always be limited, and they are not fit to rule. To return to the modern example above, the consenting parents of the teenager who is opposed to current laws about recreational drugs will do well by supporting him to join demonstrations against the law. In that way they all execute their civic virtue – although it does not relieve them of the duty to follow the law while it is in existence.

It should be mentioned here as an aside that the fairly modest developmental demands placed upon people at Levels 1 and 2 may provide an explanation of the claim frequently made by Aristotle that the virtue of civic friendship, holding constitutions together as their greatest

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<sup>88</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, p. 195 [1277b28–29].

<sup>89</sup> Gustin Law gives an example of how this would mean, for instance, trying to counter some of the unsound extremisms of democracy in such a regime: L.K. Gustin Law, ‘Is Human Virtue a Civic Virtue? A Reading of Aristotle’s *Politics* 3.4’, in E.C. de Lara and R. Brouwer (eds.), *Aristotle’s Practical Philosophy: On the Relationship between the Ethics and Politics* (Dordrecht, 2017), pp. 93–118. See various other examples in J. Roberts, ‘Excellences of the Citizen and of the Individual’, in G. Anagnostopoulos (ed.), *A Companion to Aristotle* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 555–565, pp. 561–562.

<sup>90</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, p. 131 [1269a12–20].

‘blessing’<sup>91</sup>, even above and beyond justice, is a form of *utility friendships*.<sup>92</sup> There are those who find Aristotle’s description of civic friendships so exalted and demanding that it must be ‘based in virtue and not merely utility’:<sup>93</sup> namely, must be a form of the highest friendship type in Aristotle’s theory: *character friendships*. However, character friendships can *ex hypothesi* only be implemented between developing or developed *phronimoi*; and this would limit civic friendship to a sub-group of the population not big enough to safeguard the state against civic conflict.<sup>94</sup>

*Level Three Civic Virtue: Phronetic Civic Virtue.* Here we enter a level of civic virtue that is qualitatively different from the two earlier levels in being reserved for people endowed with *phronesis*. Although *phronesis* is always a good thing and a bonus if ordinary citizens possess it, Aristotle only talks about this level in the context of the metacognitive capacity that rulers in ‘correct’ constitutions need. They must possess complete *phronesis*,<sup>95</sup> which also presupposes full moral virtue – and it would be ‘absurd’ to think that the governance of a state should be in the hands of the base rather than the virtuous.<sup>96</sup> While this level of civic virtue is confined to ‘correct’ constitutions, those are not perfect in the same way as the ideal state and have to control a populace that is defective in moral virtue. The ruler will make sure that his civic virtue is never at odds with moral virtue; yet there will be many procedures and laws in place in those regimes that are amoral or go beyond the moral. Moreover, the specific norms will differ as much as polities, aristocracies and kingdoms differ, although they all aim at the

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<sup>91</sup> See e.g. *ibid.*, p. 81 [1262b7–9].

<sup>92</sup> See e.g. J.M. Cooper, ‘Political Animals and Civic Friendship’, in Kraut and Skultety (eds.), *Aristotle’s Politics*, pp. 65–89; E. Irrera, ‘Between Advantage and Virtue: Aristotle’s Theory of Political Friendship’, *History of Political Thought*, 26 (4) (2005), pp. 565–585.

<sup>93</sup> Curren, *Aristotle on the Necessity of Public Education*, p. 133.

<sup>94</sup> This may not be as significant a concession as Curren would deem it to be, however, because it turns out that there are two sub-levels of utility friendships in Aristotle, and one of them is quite close to character friendships. See K. Kristjánsson, ‘The Moral Value of Aristotelian Friendships for Utility, with an Online Example’, *Amity: The Journal of Friendship Studies*, 7 (1) (2021), pp. 1–22.

<sup>95</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, p. 63 [1260a14–17].

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229 [1282a24–27].

common good. Thus, the civic virtues at Level 3 are to a large degree extensions rather than applications of moral virtue.

To return to our modern example, the teenager should not dream of becoming a ruler in the state until he has reached the level of *phronetic* virtue. Whether he ever reaches that level is dependent upon not only his own acumen and good will but also various features of ‘moral luck’ that are beyond his control. Even if he achieves a position of power, he will need to take various contextual and local factors into consideration, other than merely moral ones, before he can change the law that he opposes.

*Level 4 Civic Virtue: Phronetic (Combined) Moral and Civic Virtue.* Here we move from the actual to the ideal. Let us assume that a group of *phronimoi* does, in fact, move and set up a new colony in a favourable place, establishing an ideal state. All the male inhabitants of this colony will be equally capable of ruling and being ruled and will do so by turns. As all laws will be designed from scratch, a unique opportunity beckons to create a perfect concordance between the civic and the moral: laws and other civic ordinances will just be direct applications of moral virtues. I already explained the general contours of the ideal state above, and Aristotle adds little information about it in terms of practical application. That is understandable because most of his discussion of actual constitutions is drawn from real-life examples but there is obviously no such example available yet for the ideal state. Nevertheless, I include it in Table 2, summarising the four levels of civic virtue, because although Aristotle talks about the fourth level as an idealisation, it is meant to be realistic idealisation – hopefully to be actualised or at least approximated somewhere at some point in time.

Table 1: Four levels of civic virtue in Aristotle’s *Politics*

	For whom?	The same as moral virtue?	Includes <i>phronesis</i> ?	In what kind of constitutions?
1. Uncritical law-abidingness	The ruled	No, and at times evidently incompatible	No	Correct and erroneous

2. Critical law-abidingness	The ruled	No, but compatible	No	Correct and erroneous
3. <i>Phronetic</i> civic virtue	The rulers	No, incorporates moral virtue but goes beyond it	Yes	Correct
4. <i>Phronetic</i> combined (moral and civic) virtue	The rulers and the ruled	Yes	Yes	Ideal

Before leaving the discussion of the four levels, it is worth mentioning an interesting oddity. Aristotle twice refers to the *phronimoi* at Level 4 (who can be either rulers or the ruled) as *megalopsychoi*.<sup>97</sup> Now, Aristotle's great-souled persons (*megalopsychoi*) constitute a unique group of alpha males who, in addition to being full-fledged *phronimoi*, are endowed with an abundance of worldly riches and decide to use those to engage in philanthropy, public benefaction and deeds of grandeur, requiring bravery and spectacular efforts. *Megalopsychia* is described as a moral meta-virtue that extends the sphere of the ordinary moral virtues and makes them greater.<sup>98</sup> Yet, becoming *megalopsychoi* is a mixed blessing for the persons themselves for it requires sacrificing wonder and other intellectual pursuits, consigning the *megalopsychoi* to lives of philistinism where they are constantly at others' beck and call with no time left for many of life's niceties.<sup>99</sup> As spelled out in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, being a *megalopsychos* seems to presuppose a community where most people are not, and where those alpha-male characters can therefore make a significant contribution to the common good. It is difficult to imagine a community where all the males are *megalopsychoi*, however. It is like a community where everyone is an eager medical doctor but there are no patients to cure. So one is left to wonder whether Aristotle has dropped in these *megalopsychoi*-comments about his utopia without thinking them through. On the other hand, there is some mileage in the point

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 569; 645 [1328a9–10; 1338b2–4].

<sup>98</sup> Aristotle, *NE*, pp. 97–104 [1123b33–1125a35].

<sup>99</sup> See further in J.T. Fetter, 'Aristotle's Great-Souled Man: The Limited Perfection of the Ethical Values', *History of Political Thought*, 36 (1) (2015), pp. 1–28; Kristjánsson, *Flourishing as the Aim of Education*, chap. 4.

that the sort of civic virtue ascribed to the rulers signals an extension of ordinary civic virtue, just like great-souled virtue extends ordinary virtue.

Rather than thinking of this in terms of *megalopsychia*, it may be more instructive to revisit the idea of *phronesis*-guided civic virtue (at Levels 3 and 4). I mentioned earlier that despite the recent surge of interest in *phronesis* and its role in adjudicating virtue conflicts involving potentially clashing moral virtues (like honesty versus loyalty to friends), little has been written since the time of Aristotle about the specific role that *phronesis* plays in relation to civic virtue. An initial hypothesis could be that there is no need to write specifically about *phronesis* in those contexts. It simply operates there as elsewhere by critically overseeing and deliberating about the best way to reach an overall wise decision, conducive to a flourishing life. However, what Aristotle actually says about the *phronesis* of the ruler suggests a slightly more complicated picture. When he says in the *Politics* that *phronesis* is ‘peculiar to a ruler’ and the citizens do not need it,<sup>100</sup> one may first read this cavalierly as referring to the majority of ordinary citizens who can survive and thrive to a certain extent by being well self-controlled rather than *phronetically* virtuous. However, a deeper reading of this citation and the surrounding text reveals that Aristotle is clearly talking about *all* citizens barring the rulers not needing *phronesis*. But that seems a blatant contradiction with respect to the message from the *Nicomachean Ethics* according to which at least a small group of citizens are, in fact, already budding or fully developed *phronimoi* and those who are not should make an effort at getting there also if they possibly can.<sup>101</sup>

This apparent contradiction prompts a second look at what Aristotle says about *phronesis* in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. It so happens that he mentions Pericles and other politicians as paragons of *phronesis* because they take into account what is good not only for

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<sup>100</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, p. 195 [1277b25–29].

<sup>101</sup> Frede (2005, pp. 175–176) identifies this problem but does not suggest any clear-cut solution to it there. Later in her chapter, however, she toys with an idea of two kinds of *phronesis*, as I suggest in what follows. See D. Frede, ‘Citizenship in Aristotle’s *Politics*’, in Kraut and Skultety (eds.), *Aristotle’s Politics*, pp. 167–184.

themselves but human beings more generally.<sup>102</sup> It is not a big stretch to interpret Aristotle as claiming there that the sphere of *phronesis* differs between a *phronetic* ruler like Pericles and the ordinary *phronimos* – especially in light of what he says elsewhere about the difference between the good of the individual and of the whole state.<sup>103</sup> One of the components of ordinary *phronesis* is some sort of a blueprint of flourishing,<sup>104</sup> but Aristotle nowhere says that it is the flourishing of all the citizens in the state, let alone of all humankind (he was not a utilitarian!); and although he was not a rational egoist either, confining his attention to the agent’s own personal good, what he seems to be talking about as the blueprint for ordinary *phronesis* is the flourishing of oneself, one’s friends and family – or, more widely perhaps, of the people directly affected by one’s decision. However, Pericles has a wider blueprint component to accommodate, because his duty as a ruler is to execute civic virtue in the interest of the common good,<sup>105</sup> and that will include *everyone* in the state.

This interpretation defangs the apparent contradiction identified earlier. The *phronesis* that is ‘peculiar to the ruler’ denotes a wider concept of *phronesis* than that aspired to by ordinary citizens – so there actually is a unique kind of civic *phronesis*: namely, *phronesis* needed to guide civic virtue. Gustin Law warns against this interpretation going too far, because Aristotle says that ‘political science’ (which I have interpreted earlier as meaning *phronetic* social science) is the ‘same state’ as ordinary *phronesis*.<sup>106</sup> But Aristotle also says in the same place that their ‘being is not the same’. What that could charitably be taken to mean is that civic *phronesis* – while not *qualitatively* different from ordinary *phronesis* applied to moral virtues only – is *quantitatively* different, by attaching itself to a wider range of issues and a wider group

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<sup>102</sup> Aristotle, *NE*, p. 154 [1140b7–11].

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3 [1094b7–10].

<sup>104</sup> See Darnell et al., ‘*Phronesis* and the Knowledge–Action Gap’.

<sup>105</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, p. 205 [1279a28–30].

<sup>106</sup> Gustin Law, ‘Is Human Virtue a Civic Virtue?’; Aristotle, *NE*, p. 159 [1141b23–24].

of people. So what we end up with are two levels of *phronesis*, with civic *phronesis* being accorded a unique status.<sup>107</sup>

There is a final twist to this narrative of potential *phronesis* augmentation. Aristotle also mentions the possibility that wise decisions reached by a group of partially *phronetic* persons may be better than a *phronetic* decision made by a single ruler, just as a dinner cooked by many may be better than one provided by a single chef.<sup>108</sup> Aristotle does not bring this discussion to a clear conclusion;<sup>109</sup> however, it reminds us painfully of the fact that although the notion of ‘collective *phronesis*’ as the pooling of wisdom is not totally unheard of in the contemporary literature, it is an area that is, so far, seriously under-researched and under-developed.<sup>110</sup> Unfortunately, some parts of this discourse have not moved much forward since Aristotle’s time.

## V

### Educational Implications

Although the argument in this article has mainly proceeded by way of excavation into Aristotle’s ancient texts, the original motivation for writing it was current and substantive rather than historical: namely, to make sense of the ongoing tensions between character

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<sup>107</sup> Interestingly, Aristotle throws up at various junctures in the *Politics* the possibility that there might be people of super-human civic virtue, ideal to fill the role of a benevolent monarch. While this is just suggested as a theoretical possibility, without real-life examples, it creates conceptual space for an even higher level of *civic virtue* than those I have identified above. See further in Frede, ‘Citizenship in Aristotle’s *Politics*’, pp. 179–180. Notably, Aristotle also mentions the possibility of super-human *moral virtue* in the *Nicomachean Ethics* but attributes it mostly to gods.

<sup>108</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, pp. 221–223 [1281a40–b10].

<sup>109</sup> Cf. Ober, ‘Aristotle’s Natural Democracy’, pp. 237–240. Nonetheless, Waldron identifies a ‘doctrine of the wisdom of the multitude’ in Aristotle and pushes the concept in a radically democratic direction: J. Waldron, ‘The Wisdom of the Multitude: Some Reflections on Book III, Chapter 11 of Aristotle’s *Politics*’, in Kraut and Skultety (eds.), *Aristotle’s Politics*, pp. 145–165. Cf. also Schwartzberg who uses the concept to defend a proceduralist (as distinct from an outcome-based) interpretation of democracy: M. Schwartzberg, ‘Aristotle and the Judgment of the Many: Equality, Not Collective Quality’, *The Journal of Politics*, 78 (3) (2016), pp. 733–745. For a critical rejoinder, see K. Kristjánsson, ‘Collective *Phronesis* in Business Ethics Education and Managerial Practice: A Neo-Aristotelian Analysis’, *Journal of Business Ethics*, in press. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10551-021-04912-2>.

<sup>110</sup> See Kristjánsson, ‘Collective *Phronesis* in Business Ethics Education and Managerial Practice’.



education and civic education, especially regarding the priority of moral versus civic virtue, as well as their cultivation. Aristotle's discussion is obviously not the *last word* on those issues, but given his historical role as the forebear of both those forms of values education, it is reasonable to see it as the *first word*.

The conclusion I have reached is that there are no historical or substantive grounds for seeing character education and civic education as competitors, at least if we agree on following a broad Aristotelian script. Character education comes, for developmental reasons, most naturally before civic education, because of the child's initial close familiarity with the in-group – although I identified one fairly primitive kind of civic virtue (uncritical law-abidingness) that can easily be taught alongside early character education. However, because of the teleological primacy of the civic, civic education is the more sophisticated and advanced of the two and also more demanding than character education except at Level 1.<sup>111</sup> Yet that level is important because it allows everyone to internalise civic virtue, even those who do not go on to develop moral virtue. Level 1 is also the only level at which the moral could potentially come into conflict with the civic; but should that happen, the student must be made to advance as soon as possible to Level 2 of critical law-abidingness where she is able to criticise the content of the Level 1 civic virtue in light of a (habituated) moral virtue or a more general moral outlook.<sup>112</sup>

The above excavation also revealed a potentially more expansive kind of *phronesis*, civic *phronesis*, which augments ordinary *phronesis* and is invaluable for those in charge of ruling a state. It is somewhat remarkable, given the recent interest in a (neo)-Aristotelian

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<sup>111</sup> A common assumption in civic educational critiques of character education is that the latter is somehow more conservative than civic education, while civic education is more radical (Jerome and Kisby, *The Rise of Character Education in Britain*). However, since civic education follows naturally in the wake of character education, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that a truly radical change in moral make-up can more feasibly be accomplished if it takes place at the earlier developmental stage (cf. Kristjánsson, 'Beyond Democratic Justice', p. 218).

<sup>112</sup> Kraut (*Aristotle*, p. 380) considers civic virtue 'less exalted' than moral virtue because an agent can actualise it (at what I called Levels 1 and 2) without possessing *phronetic* moral virtue. Nevertheless, once you advance to the higher levels, the teleological primacy of the civic begins to kick in, and civic virtue becomes more demanding than even *phronetic* moral virtue.

conception of *phronesis* and all the buzz around wisdom more generally in psychology,<sup>113</sup> that a thorough literature search revealed no articles exploring the difference between ordinary *phronesis* and civic *phronesis* in an Aristotelian context. Moreover, it turned out that another suggestion elicited from Aristotle's *Politics*, about the value of collective *phronesis* (where many cooks improve, rather than spoil, the broth) has also received much less attention that one could have expected.<sup>114</sup>

What educational implications does Aristotle himself draw from his discussion in the *Politics* of civic virtue and how it differs from moral virtue? Surprisingly few. He remains as reticent as in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example, about the exact ways in which to move a student from merely habituated to *phronetic* virtue. The strong thesis from the *Nicomachean Ethics* about the supreme importance of good education (above and beyond good laws) for psycho-moral and socio-moral development is still in full force in the *Politics*.<sup>115</sup> Yet when Aristotle begins to describe in considerable detail the educational system in the ideal state, the focus seems to be more on the general contours of the curriculum, and what subject to teach at which age, than about the pedagogies of character or civic development specifically.<sup>116</sup> Not all may be what it seems here, though.

What we expect, but fail to, see in the educational chapters of the *Politics* is how students are prepared for *phronetic* moral and civic virtue through discursive methods, for instance critical discussions of moral quandaries, such as Aristotle conducts himself,

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<sup>113</sup> Darnell et al., 'Phronesis and the Knowledge–Action Gap'; I. Grossmann et al., 'The Science of Wisdom in a Polarized World: Knowns and Unknowns', *Psychological Inquiry*, 31 (2) (2020), pp. 103–133.

<sup>114</sup> Kristjánsson, 'Collective Phronesis in Business Ethics Education and Managerial Practice'.

<sup>115</sup> See e.g. Aristotle, *Politics*, pp. 275; 435 [1288b1; 1310a12–14]. Interestingly, Aristotle brings up the standard question, which still occupies the minds of many contemporary educators, on whether the ethical or the intellectual is more important in schooling (*Politics*, p. 637 [1337a39–41]). In matters of education, there is nothing new under the sun.

<sup>116</sup> To be sure, all the young students in the ideal state will have been brought up in good habits in the home, and hence need less formal education in moral matters. Yet one would have expected to see some guidance on the development of the intellectual virtue of *phronesis*. Aristotle divides the school years into two main periods: age 7–puberty, and then puberty–21 (*Politics*, p. 633 [1336b38–41]). A plausible modern character-education hypothesis would be that habituated virtue is mainly cultivated in the former period but *phronetic* virtue in the latter. If that was Aristotle view, he, however, forgoes the chance to say so.

particularly in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. However, what we get instead is an exclusive focus on what would be called, post-Dewey, ‘learning by doing’, especially learning through sports (gymnastic exercises) and music. The latter is a broad term, which may include lyrics and poetry in addition to instrumental music, but Aristotle does insist that each student also learns to play a musical instrument. Although some of the uses of these curricular subjects are practical in an amoral sense – sport being instrumental for defence purposes and music for occupying leisure time – there is no doubt that Aristotle believed in their *character-forming* capacities. This emerges most clearly in his frequent references to how music can regulate the emotions and contribute to a homeostasis in the soul.<sup>117</sup> He does not say this as explicitly, but there is little doubt that he would have thought the same about the balancing effects of music for civic concord in the state. Aristotle is, as always, motivated here by his strong belief in psycho-moral equilibrium and in hitting the ‘golden mean’ as a measure of moral competence. Even before the ideal time for those subjects in the curriculum, during the first years of life when the children are to be educated in the home only, there is no mention of discussions about stories but just of children being told stories and learning from supervised play.<sup>118</sup>

The two most striking features of the educational discourse in the final chapters of the *Politics* are first, as already mentioned, the lack of focus on moral discussions and, second, the fact that the methods described seem to have more to do with the early habituation of virtue than its subsequent *phronesis*-infusion. One can only offer educated guesses as to why this is the case. Aristotle inherited from Socrates and Plato a deep distrust of the sort of rhetorical teaching that was practised by the private teachers of their time, the sophists.<sup>119</sup> This may be the reason why he is so quiet about formal discussions and debates with students. Moreover, one may divine from the long chapters on friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the second

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<sup>117</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, pp. 275; 435 [1288b1; 1310a12–14].

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 627 [1336a25–34]

<sup>119</sup> Aristotle, *NE*, p. 296 [1181a1–8].

critical stage of moral education – the *phronesis*-guided one – is mainly stimulated through informal engagement with mentors and character friends rather than formal methods of education. Yet, when it comes to Level 3 and 4 civic virtue, it seems reasonable that some sort of instruction in political science would have to be provided, especially for prospective rulers. However, distinct from his mentor Plato who obviously required the rulers in his utopian state to undergo strict training, Aristotle does seem to think that the capacity for ruling comes naturally, through experience, to people who have succeeded in developing high levels of civic virtue.

One well-known aspect of Aristotle’s educational theory is his thesis that, once home schooling ends at the age of 7, education in the (ideal) state must be conducted along public, not private, lines and ‘be one and the same for all’, in order to secure cohesion and concord and ensure all get the same training in civic virtues.<sup>120</sup> Curren has fleshed out this public-education thesis in great detail and applied it to modern concerns in what is still the best work on the educational ramifications of Aristotle’s political theorising.<sup>121</sup> He explains how Aristotle’s demand for public schooling rests on the principle of respect for reason in ourselves and others and the need to unite people under a common law. Public schooling requires a uniform curriculum delivered by state-sanctioned teachers in institutions to which all children have equal access, irrespective of socio-economic status. I have nothing to add to Curren’s detailed analysis except to note how uncharacteristically radical this thesis is, coming from the usually pragmatic realist Aristotle, as sending children from their homes to enter a common system of education was completely unheard of at his time in Athens.<sup>122</sup>

Taken together, various claims that Aristotle makes in the *Politics* – especially about the need for extensive state intervention to provide citizens with the external necessities for

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<sup>120</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, pp. 635–636 [1337a1–34].

<sup>121</sup> Curren, *Aristotle on the Necessity of Public Education*.

<sup>122</sup> Cf. Kraut, *Aristotle*, p. 207.

developing their excellences; state-designed-and-run education with basically a prohibition on private schools;<sup>123</sup> and various comments, not mentioned above, castigating pecuniary aspirations that create excessive wealth inequalities – render it impossible, in my view, to connect any view of education that can be considered even remotely Aristotelian to a ‘neoliberal’ agenda. If Jerome and Kisby are right<sup>124</sup> (which I do not think they are, for what it is worth<sup>125</sup>) that major efforts currently afoot to revive Aristotelian character education in the U.K. are influenced by neoliberalism, then this would simply show that those efforts cannot be Aristotelian at all; not even neo-Aristotelian, however broadly one interprets the ‘neo’. At the risk of committing an anachronistic fallacy, given how different socio-political conditions were in ancient Greece from our time, Nussbaum’s interpretation seems closer to the truth: namely, that there is ‘fascinating convergence’ between Aristotle’s political and educational ideas and the policies of modern Scandinavian social democracies.<sup>126</sup> Yet what must not be forgotten is that Aristotle’s reflections about the importance of civic virtues were predicated upon the existence of states no larger than modern-day townships. This is particularly relevant to his foregrounding of civic friendships. The most immediate contemporary comparison would be to civic relationships between people within small communities, neighbourhoods or institutions rather than within modern mega-states.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> That said, as far as I can see, nothing in Aristotle’s theory excludes the possibility that the state outsources the actual running of schools to private educational providers, for example through some kind of a voucher system, as long as the conditions of equal access and a uniform state-sanctioned curriculum are satisfied. Different schools could thus, in principle, compete for students by offering, say, different pedagogical approaches: traditionalist versus progressive. However, I agree with Curren (*Aristotle on the Necessity of Public Education*, pp. 216–220) that Aristotle’s strict conditions of access and content would probably preclude the formation of a free market in schooling. Most parents opt for non-state-run schools because they offer superior educational opportunities or a different curriculum (e.g. religiously tethered) in ways that Aristotle’s conditions are meant to rule out.

<sup>124</sup> Jerome and Kisby, *The Rise of Character Education in Britain*.

<sup>125</sup> See Kristjánsson, ‘Recent Attacks on Character Education’.

<sup>126</sup> M.C. Nussbaum, ‘Aristotelian Social Democracy’, in R.B. Douglass, G.M. Mara and H.S. Richardson (eds.), *Liberalism and the Good* (London, 1990), pp. 203–252. This is obviously a very controversial claim. For a critical rejoinder, see R. Mulgan, ‘Was Aristotle a “Scandinavian Social Democrat”?’ *Ethics*, 111 (1) (2000), pp. 79–101.

<sup>127</sup> Aware of this problem, Curren and Elenbaas consider various ways in which civic virtues (in particular, civic friendships) could be cultivated between sub-groups within larger social communities or across communities. For instance, ‘teams of students could be brought together through teleconferencing and other means to collaboratively research challenges in their respective communities and develop and promote proposals to address them’: R.

Looking past some of the unsavoury features of the *Politics*, especially regarding the status of slaves, women and workers, where Aristotle was too quick to second classical-era *endoxa*, Kraut projects a very appealing picture of Aristotle's ideal state:

All citizens would be well educated. None would live in isolation. All would enjoy their families, friends, and households, but each would also be an active citizen impartially dedicated to the common good. Issues facing the whole community would be discussed openly and thoughtfully, and disagreements would be free of rancor. A sense of justice and friendship would pervade the community. All would have the material resources needed to live well, and inequalities would be too small to excite envy. Citizens would value themselves and each other for their qualities as human beings, not for their wealth and power.<sup>128</sup>

However, even if someone found this blueprint appealing enough to warrant a contemporary revival, mere replication will not suffice. First, current educators would have to be persuaded that the educational issues Aristotle was addressing in the context of ancient Greece are similar enough to the ones facing the modern world in Western liberal democracies to allow for solutions that are in any way similar. Second, as Aristotle fails to offer a clear pedagogical account of the major phases of socio-moral development, during which habituated virtue turns into *phronetic moral*, and later ideally also *phronetic civic*, virtue, there is no hope of lifting any 'off-the-shelf' strategies from his texts. Those will have to be reconceived and readapted for the needs of contemporary classrooms.

To end with a nod to the tensions between current character education and civic education, explained at the beginning of this article, a question that beckons is whether proponents of those approaches would be wise to accommodate Aristotle's specifications of moral versus civic virtues, and the developmental and teleological relationship between the two, in their entirety. I leave a detailed response to that question for another day. What I can

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Curren and L. Elenbaas, 'Civic Friendship', *Insight Series Paper* (2021). Available at: [https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/insight-series/RC\\_LE\\_CivicFriendship.pdf](https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/insight-series/RC_LE_CivicFriendship.pdf), p. 10.

<sup>128</sup> Kraut, *Aristotle*, p. 481.

say is that, insofar as proponents of either approach consider themselves neo-Aristotelian, they cannot ignore the message of the *Politics* with impunity.