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Kristjansson, Kristjan; Harrison, Tom; Peterson, Andrew

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Kristján Kristjánsson, Tom Harrison & Andrew Peterson

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Reconsidering the ‘Ten Myths’ about Character Education

By KRISTJÁN KRISTJÁNSSON, TOM HARRISON and ANDREW PETERSON, Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

ABSTRACT: Is character education flawed as an approach to values education? A 2013 article answered that question in the negative and defused ten common objections against character education as ‘myths’. The aim of the present article is to revisit those objections and consider the evidence that has accumulated since 2013. After a brief historical and conceptual rehearsal, the core section of the article is taken up with reminders of the original arguments rebutting each myth, complemented with additional updated, and more extensive, considerations that were not available at the time. The original article contained a section on ‘three well-founded misgivings’. We argue that none of those misgivings is as relevant in today’s climate as they were in 2013. However, we acknowledge that those misgivings have been superseded by new challenges that test the theoretical flexibility and empirical credibility of character education. To ensure that those interested in human flourishing can continue to dispel myths about character education and address the most pressing challenges in the field, we close with some reflections on the future of character education and where we see its next ideal academic destinations to be.

Keywords: character education, myths and misgivings, neo-Aristotelianism, virtue ethics, future developments

1. INTRODUCTION

There has long existed in academic circles – in education, psychology, sociology, and philosophy – the suspicion that character education (understood as the educational incarnation of virtue ethics) is somehow a flawed approach, and that its appeal is therefore meretricious rather than meritorious. The most popular current form of character education in the West is based on (neo)Aristotelian principles, and misgivings about that heritage will thus automatically translate into misgivings about its modern manifestations. However, doubts about the educational value of character education go beyond the philosophical foundations upon which character education rests. As such, those who wish to advocate for neo-Aristotelian character education, as we do, are tasked with rebutting
these misgivings and doubts. One of the present authors wrote an article over a decade ago (Kristjánsson, 2013) that conceptualised as ‘myths’ ten of the most common objections – with myths 1–2 being conceptual, myths 3–4 historical, myths 5–6 moral, myths 7–8 political, myth 9 epistemological, and myth 10 psychological – and aimed to deconstruct them with theoretical and empirical arguments.

The ‘ten-myths’ article has been downloaded more than 22,000 times and thus seems to have satisfied a strong demand for scholarly analysis of the standard misgivings about character education. However, the field has moved on and a cornucopia of relevant theoretical analyses and empirical studies have appeared over the last decade that have rendered the 2013 article partly outdated. Many of those studies have imparted a new edge and added force to the arguments for character education as well as the possibility for its advocates to rebut the ‘myths’. However, at the same time, new worries have arisen since the original article was written. These new challenges have heralded a different set of problems and affordances to which any approach to values education in schools – such as character education – must be ready to respond.

In this context, we perceive of a need to revisit and reconsider the arguments from the 2013 article and update those in light of new developments. The aim is to give readers as topical an overview of the state of the art in debates about character education as possible – at least from the perspective of those sympathetic to this educational approach and remaining motivated to defend it. After a brief historical and conceptual rehearsal in Section 2, the longest section of the article (Section 3) is taken up with brief summaries of the original arguments rebutting each myth, complemented with additional, and more extensive, considerations that have become available since 2013. Notably, the original article contained a section on ‘three well-founded misgivings’. We argue, in Section 4, that none of those misgivings is as relevant any more in today’s climate and that they have, in a sense, been defused. However, we acknowledge that the three misgivings have been superseded by other challenges that test the theoretical flexibility and empirical credibility of character education. Whilst these new challenges often involve elements of ‘myth’, they create new ‘well-founded misgivings’ that await, and indeed prompt, further work from character educationists. We then close, in Section 5, with some reflections on the future of character education and where we see its next ideal academic destinations to be, and in doing so we outline a roadmap for future research in the field.

2. A Brief Historical and Conceptual Background

In 2012, the first research centre devoted to character education in the UK was established, the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham. At that time, a need was identified for anticipating and pre-empting various academic objections that might be lodged against character
education and the work of the Jubilee Centre, if only to prevent misunderstandings about the intentions of both. The ‘ten myths’ article (Kristjánsson, 2013) aimed to satisfy that need. It was anticipated that questions over character education might more or less reflect concerns that arose in the USA when character education gained political and educational attention in the last two decades of the 20th century (see, e.g., Lickona, 1991); hence the original choice of the ten anticipated concerns. Those concerns typically stemmed from political liberals/progressives and depicted character education as essentially right-wing, reactionary, religiously tethered, and all about ‘fixing individual kids’ rather than attending to unjust social structures (see, e.g., Kohn, 1997; Purpel, 1997).

Similar concerns about character education in the English context have been advanced since the original ‘ten-myths’ paper, with some accusing character education of promoting a ‘conservative neoliberal political agenda’, representing an individualist, ‘responsibilised and de-politicised’ psychological turn (Allen and Bull, 2018, p. 439; Bull and Allen, 2018, p. 395; Jerome and Kisby, 2019, p. 126). While such criticisms have been responded to either in part or in full (e.g., Kristjánsson, 2021; Peterson, 2020a), it remains the case that debates about character education can run the risk of favouring adversary over constructive directions.

Despite these concerns, the trajectory of character education, in the UK and elsewhere, towards fuller theoretical maturity, empirical confirmation, and policy recognition is notable – although the academic assumptions underwriting this trajectory continue to be subjected to a healthy argument. Jubilee Centre academics have continued to publish reports, peer-reviewed articles, and books; it is worth singling out here the revised edition of the widely-used Framework for Character Education in Schools (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022) and the Framework for Virtue-Based Professional Ethics (Arthur et al., 2023). To a significant extent due to the influence of the Jubilee Centre, character education discourse has become normalised and established in the education arena across the UK, Europe, and internationally. Ofsted (2019) has recognised character education as one of the core aspects of good school practice in England; an Association for Character Education (ACE) in UK schools has been formed; so has a European Character and Virtue Association (Fernández et al., 2024); and the OECD has incorporated ideas from the Centre into its development of a flourishing agenda for schools world-wide (Stevenson, 2022). In the USA, one of the largest private educational funders, the Kern Family Foundation, has turned the Centre’s conceptualisations into the foundations upon which it prompts its grantees to work, while the John Templeton Foundation have also used the Framework as part of its grant-making processes.

Furthermore, the ‘science of character’ has matured in the last decade into a respectable body of theory and practice. This development is particularly noticeable within psychology, which ten years ago mostly turned a cold
shoulder to characterological research as irretrievably value-laden and vague (with the exception of non-mainstream ‘positive psychology’, e.g., Peterson and Seligman, 2004). In contrast, major conceptual studies of character and virtues now appear with regularity in psychology, although often co-authored by philosophers (Ng and Tay, 2020; Wright et al., 2021; Fowers et al., 2024). Practical educational work (e.g., Berkowitz, 2021; Watts et al., 2021) has helped to channel the theoretically driven message to practitioners. This body of work has also aided the uptake of character education within different areas of social science where the centre of gravity in character-related research has been moving away from the concepts of ‘character’ and ‘virtue’, with their chequered historical baggage (see later), to the less loaded constructs of flourishing (VanderWeele, 2017) and practical wisdom or phronesis (Kristjánsson and Fowers, 2024). Moreover, the pedagogical interest in character-educational strategies has shifted significantly from behaviouristic methods of habituation (Lickona, 1991) towards more cognitively complex methods (Arthur et al., 2022; Brown et al., 2023), such as critical exemplar-emulation (Henderson, 2024).

Despite these positive developments incipient tensions still exist that can at times transform into explicit antagonisms. For example, despite efforts from advocates of character education, including the present authors, to build bridges between the two fields (e.g., Kristjánsson, 2022a; Peterson, 2020a), questions remain about whether character education and civic/citizenship education are best viewed as friends or enemies (Jerome and Kisby, 2019; Suissa, 2015). The same applies to sustainability education, which often views character education with a beady eye (Jordan, 2022), and the area of digital or cyber-education, where educational efforts were, until recently at least, mostly inspired by deontology and utilitarianism, rather than the kind of virtue ethics in which character education is grounded (Harrison and Polizzi, 2021). This fractional strife within the general area of values education – which forms a motley and heteronomous admixture – remains a theoretical and practical hindrance.

Before turning to an update of the responses to the ‘ten myths’, it must be made clear that the discourse in this article, as in the 2013 one, is limited to the kind of character education promoted by the Jubilee Centre – which is broadly speaking neo-Aristotelian. While avoiding deferential acquiescence in all the theorising of Aristotle himself, pursuing a neo-Aristotelian agenda brings to the fore certain philosophical assumptions that make neo-Aristotelian character education unique, but also open it up to a set of well-known objections. Among the relevant assumptions here are a normative theory of virtue ethics, an ontology of moral realism, an epistemology of soft rationalism, and a methodology of ethical naturalism (Peterson and Kristjánsson, 2024). Other forms of character education – such as the conservative American one of the late 1980s/early 1990s (Lickona, 1991), the current liberal American one (Berkowitz, 2021), and the positive psychological form (Peterson and
Seligman, 2004) – not to mention non-Western incarnations, such as Confucian virtue ethics (Yu, 2007) – may be liable to a greater or to a lesser extent to the objections discussed in the remainder of this article.\textsuperscript{6}

Although all forms of character education share some conceptual and normative features, having to do with the nature and salience of human character and its role in the good life, significant differences remain, for instance between positive psychological character theory and the neo-Aristotelian one – so much so that in some argumentative domains each party will be dissatisfied by the very considerations that gratify the other (see, e.g., Arthur et al., 2016; Gulliford, 2020). In other words, these forms are too varied to be adequately placed with reference to a fixed set of parameters, and – contra some of the earlier mentioned critics – there is no single uniform ‘network’ of character education at work in the UK or elsewhere.\textsuperscript{7} So when sceptics inveigh against character education, it is helpful that they specify exactly which form of character education. To repeat, the discussion in what follows is about old and new myths, misgivings, and challenges that relate specifically to neo-Aristotelian character education.

3. The Ten Myths – Old and New Responses

The simplest, if not the briefest, definition of neo-Aristotelian ‘character education’ is that it refers to a form of holistic moral education, focusing on the systematic development (through ‘taught’, ‘caught’, and ‘sought’ methods) of virtues (moral, intellectual, civic, and performance) as stable traits of character, with the aim of promoting individual and societal human flourishing (\textit{eudaimonia}), founded on a general Aristotelian virtue theory, updated with findings from contemporary empirical (psychological and educational) research. This definition already eliminates some mistaken views of character education as being solely about uncritical behavioural conditioning or individual wellbeing. However, even if the definition may put some worries to rest, others will remain; and we address those below by retracing the steps from the ten-myths article (Kristjánsson, 2013). More specifically, we rehearse the given objections/‘myths’, recall some of the earlier responses to them, and then add new evidence and considerations.

\textit{Myth 1: ‘Character and Virtue are Unclear Notions.’}

The 2013 article attempted to assuage this worry in two ways and reconceptualise the idea that character and virtue are unclear as a ‘myth’. One was by acknowledging that these concepts are open-textured and, hence, cannot be defined with the same level of specificity as, say, mathematical concepts. The second was to remind readers that within traditional virtue ethics, these terms have fairly acceptable and unambiguous meanings.
Since 2013, the Jubilee Centre has developed its conceptualisations of character and virtue further over the years, for instance by nuancing the categorisations of virtues into the four groups of moral, intellectual, civic, and performance and by extracting different virtue components (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022; Peterson and Kristjánsson, 2024). Setting the tone for this work and its practical implications was the measure of gratitude (qua virtue) as a multi-componential construct, created by Morgan et al. (2017) and later carried forward to an understanding of the components of phronesis (Darnell et al., 2022). Simultaneously, considerable work has been undertaken in psychology, either inspired by the Jubilee Centre’s multi-componential understanding (e.g., Fowers et al., 2024) or independent of it in line with the powerful model of whole-trait (virtue) theory: WTT (Jayawickreme et al., 2019). Beyond the work of the Jubilee Centre, the work of Wright et al. (2021) constitutes a tour-de-force attempt to understand the nature of virtuous character, and the virtues more specifically, and how to measure them, feature by feature. Although we share some of Fowers et al. (2024) concerns about Wright et al.’s accommodation of (a modified version of) WTT, as that model underplays the difference between character and personality and hence compromises the essential moral nature of the former, we think that Wright et al.’s modifications and clarifications come a long way towards remedying those shortcomings.

More directly in line with the Jubilee Centre’s conceptualisations of character and virtue is the STRIVE-4 model advocated by Fowers et al. (2024), which explicitly takes its cue from work done within the Jubilee Centre (esp. Morgan et al., 2017). The acronym in question refers to ‘Scalar Traits that are Role sensitive, involve situation by trait Interactions, and are guided by key human Values that partly constitute Eudaimonia (human flourishing)’ (Fowers et al., 2024, p. 20). It is notable that in a field of virtue theories, whose conceptualisations used to tend towards abstract philosophical theorising, the STRIVE-4 model offers an approach to the ‘science of virtue’ that is based predominantly on empirical hypotheses, both about the references of different variables and their associations. If anything, we would say that the last decade of research into the nature of character and virtues has rendered those terms clearer and more easily operationalisable than many others in mainstream social science.

While advocates of neo-Aristotelian character education continue to question the positive psychological model of character strengths and virtues, especially because of the latter’s avoidanace of an integrative intellectual meta-virtue, such as phronesis, and its elision of a golden-mean architectonic of virtue (as rued by Ng and Tay, 2020), there is no good reason to overlook here the advances made by researchers like Bob McGrath (e.g., McGrath and Brown, 2020) in refining the characterisations of the positive psychological virtue model. All in all, considerable clarity has been achieved in understanding
‘character’ and ‘virtue’ both within education and mainstream as well as non-mainstream psychology, although there are still various competing theoretical models at work in those areas.

Myth 2: ‘Character and Virtue are Redundant Notions.’

The take on this objection qua ‘myth’ in 2013 was to subject to scrutiny the two constructs that could possibly be suggested as replacements of character and virtue, namely (Big-Five) personality and moral selfhood or identity. It was argued that neither conveys as accurately the meaning that ‘character’ and ‘virtue’ possess and that neither can appropriately assume the role played by character and virtue in moral and educational discourse. It was also shown that although some common virtue terms seem to be falling into disuse in ordinary language, others are appearing with increased frequency (such as ‘compassion’ and ‘fairness’).

In the moral realm, what many social scientists seem to be mainly interested in is prosocial behaviour. Although this is not a key concept in neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, the Jubilee Centre’s recent work has shown that to predict such behaviour, and hence to solve the infamous ‘gappiness problem’ (of what bridges the gap between moral knowledge and moral action), we need virtue constructs such as phronesis (Darnell et al., 2022). Even more recent research (McLoughlin et al., 2024) indicates that the virtue construct of phronesis predicts moral engagement far better than the much-discussed current moral psychological theory of ‘moral foundations’ (Atari et al., 2023). Phronesis is also strongly correlated with human flourishing, as Aristotle predicted (McLoughlin et al., 2024); and indeed, it is not possible to understand flourishing comprehensively without including ‘character and virtues’ as a variable (VanderWeele, 2017).

A recent objection not unrelated to the redundancy concern is that an assumption of the plurality of virtues, which advocates of neo-Aristotelian character education typically think are developed in children before the emergence of the intellectual virtue of phronesis (which is meant to synthesise those virtues), can both lead to an unhelpful proliferation of individual virtue constructs and make the process by which phronesis develops mysterious (Niccoli et al., 2024). This objection is derived from a virtue-monistic account of phronesis, according to which phronesis develops first as a skill of general moral competence and where the discrete virtue terms are simply handy names for the realisation of this general competence in specific areas of action (De Caro et al., 2018).

We must admit that we are not totally downcast by the strength of this objection. As we see it, it is based on an implausible view of developmental moral psychology, according to which a general moral competence precedes specific competences rather than being gradually built up from them. In
default of empirical evidence to support this alternative account, we do not consider it to call for the abandonment of the neo-Aristotelian *phronesis* model.

*Myth 3: ‘Character and Virtue are Old-Fashioned Notions.’*  
The thrust of the 2013 response was to point out the irony of why notions that are supposedly so old-fashioned have become so topical in academic circles of late, both in philosophy (esp. virtue ethics) and psychology (esp. positive psychology). The possibility was also mooted of recovering or breathing new life into old terms if they are found to be useful in a revived contemporary discourse.  

In light of recent development, we can now offer a more spirited update of the retrieve-and-recover response. An account of the recent uptake of character-and-virtue language in mainstream educational documents (such as Ofsted, 2019; Stevenson, 2022) and a thesis about those being essentially old-fashioned notions are simply non-co-tenable. It would be fair to say that in 2013 the terms ‘character’ and ‘virtue’ were somewhat unfamiliar to the majority of teachers working in UK schools. However, through the resuscitation of those terms and reintroduction into mainstream educational discourse by the Jubilee Centre and others, the inception of the Association for Character Education, as well as through the policy endorsements that they have received from the Department for Education and Ofsted, the meaning and use of these terms seem to have been recovered. Thus, in a recent poll of UK teachers (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2023), 76% of respondents said that they were familiar with the term ‘character education’ and 91% believed that they play a role in developing the character of their pupils. The recent academic attention being paid promoting engagement with the erstwhile obscure constructs of *eudaimonia* and *phronesis* also attest to the possibility of reviving ancient terms and infusing them with contemporary salience. So does the apparent adequacy of virtue language to conceptualise some of the most pressing issues regarding the ultra-modern notions of digital literacy and cyberwisdom (Harrison, 2022).  

All that said, we are probably more alert than a decade ago to the sensitive nature of certain terms in different cultures and contexts. This concern is borne out in many of the chapters about character education in various European countries in the volume edited by Fernández et al. (2024). For instance, the term equivalent to ‘character’ has very unfortunate historical connotations in the Germanic world. In most cases, such sensitivities can be soothed through terminological reshuffles, such as renaming ‘virtues’ as ‘character assets’ or ‘strengths’. What matters in the end is not the actual word used but rather its meaning. In some cases, however, such efforts can create unhelpful linguistic infelicities, such as when Germans refer to character education as
‘Persönlichkeitsbildung’, which seems to collapse the important distinction between character and personality.

All these complications aside, the idea that the terms ‘character’ and ‘virtue’ are old-fashioned beyond redemption remains a myth, today even more so than it did in 2013.

**Myth 4: ‘Character and Virtue are Essentially Religious Notions.’**

The 2013 article did not deny the fact that notions of moral character and virtue are a mainstay of all the world’s major religions. However, it argued that the idea of ‘character’ and ‘virtue’ not making sense or being justifiable outside of a religious context was an historical non-starter.

There is not a great deal to add here to what was already known a decade ago, except to note that the vast majority of character educationists and character educators who have adopted the neo-Aristotelian approach in recent years have done so from a perspective that is essentially secular (whether or not they happen to practise a religion in their personal lives). This comes out clearly, for example, in the volume on character education in Europe (Fernández et al., 2024), where most – though not all – of the authors approach the topic from a secular standpoint. That said, most research on moral competences (esp. self-reported ones) finds religious people scoring higher than non-religious ones (Stavrova and Siegers, 2014), and this tendency has also emerged in our own research (McLoughlin et al., 2024). One reason could be that most measures of morality contain an element of virtue literacy (i.e., testing an understanding of moral notions, such as the language of virtues), and such understanding may come more easily, in the first instance, to people who have been exposed to virtue language as part of their cultural and religious upbringing. However, even if correct, this reason must not be used to further an illegitimate slide to the claim that ‘character’ and ‘virtue’ are essentially religious notions.

**Myth 5: ‘Character and Virtue are Paternalistic Notions.’**

The 2013 article noted the varied meanings of the term ‘paternalism’ but went on to argue that character education was in no way being pressed paternalistically upon unwilling cohorts of teachers, parents, and students. Rather, it seemed to be a popular and much sought-after educational endeavour. Even assuming, for the sake of argument, that these groups did not want character education to take place, it was argued that schools are places where character development occurs, whether intentional or not, so there is no way that schools can dissociate themselves from this practice.

Subsequent research within the Jubilee Centre has revealed significant mutual misunderstandings between teachers and parents about what the other group sees as the aims of schooling. The findings from a quantitative study
conducted with 376 parents and 137 teachers working in secondary schools in the UK found that both parents and teachers prioritise character over academic attainment but perceive the opposite to be true of their counterpart (Harrison et al., 2022).

It could be urged, however, that the 2013 article did not address the issue of methodological paternalism: the tendency to impose a characterological agenda, through taught and caught methods, on students’ in their own (real or supposed) interest, but without their consent or full participation – a tendency that could be considered akin to illicit paternalism. Yet we are now better positioned to rebut such an objection than we would have been a decade ago, as the methodological focus in character education has been shifting in recent years – as already noted – from the strategies that dominated ‘character taught’ in the 1980s and 1990s, towards ‘sought’ methods, where the incentive is moved to the students to improve their own character, for instance through extracurricular activities. This change of compass has coincided with the rising interest in practical wisdom within character theories (Kristjánsson and Fowers, 2024) and in wisdom more broadly in psychology (Grossmann et al., 2020). Practical wisdom is, by its very nature, a capacity that cannot be acquired passively or paternalistically; it needs to be actively sought by the students themselves.

That said, despite attempts to sketch a trajectory of development towards full phronesis-guided virtue along Aristotelian lines (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022, p. 21), an in issue raised by one of the present authors a decade ago (Kristjánsson, 2015, chap. 8) still resonates: namely, that neo-Aristotelian character education needs more input from developmental psychology to explain the exact workings of phronesis and how/when it emerges. It is one thing to correctly write the paternalistic worry off as a myth; it is quite another to explain how children can best learn to seek the good for themselves.

**Myth 6: ‘Education in Character and Virtue is Anti-Democratic and Anti-Intellectual.’**

Starting with the ‘anti-intellectual’ aspect of this objection, the 2013 article pointed out that, if anything, Aristotelians could be accused of placing excessive intellectual demands upon the virtuous agent, as Aristotle refused to attribute any moral value whatsoever to ‘prosocial’ behaviour – at least in adults – unless it was driven by the intellectual virtue of phronesis. Regarding the ‘anti-democratic’ prong, it was asserted that this was simply a myth unless one understood ‘democratic’ to imply a radically liberal value subjectivism, an understanding that no Aristotelian or neo-Aristotelian would have sympathy with anyway.

The anti-intellectualism objection is even less relevant now than it was a decade ago, given the recent developments towards phronesis-guided
character education that have been mentioned above. It could be argued, however, that the 2013 response to the ‘anti-democratic’ objection was unnecessarily curt. After all, genuine worries exist among some citizenship educators, for instance, that neo-Aristotelian character education downplays the importance of a democratic order for the actualisation of good character and, more generally, pays scant attention to the political nature and complexities of social life. In response, and noting some areas in need of further attention (which we return to in Section 4), advocates of neo-Aristotelian character education (including one of the present authors, see e.g., Peterson, 2020a; Peterson and Civil, 2022) have gone to some lengths (i) to distil the democratic possibilities (and indeed necessities) of character education; (ii) identify the virtue-based foundations of some leading formulations of citizenship education (such as that found in the Crick Report, Crick, 1998); and (iii) recognise and support practical educational efforts of teachers in schools, within which moral and civic character are generally viewed to go hand-in-hand (Peterson et al., 2022).

Myth 7: ‘The Emphasis on Character and Virtue is Conservative.’

The 2013 article argued that if conservativism is understood as the preservation of the traditional status quo, neo-Aristotelian character education is anything but conservative. It aims at radical educational change – challenging reigning models of technicism and instrumentalism – and (if one overlooks some of obviously anachronistic features of Aristotle’s own political theory), it is also politically progressive: aiming for a flourishing society that arguably most resembles Scandinavian social democracies (Nussbaum, 1990).

The radicality of a neo-Aristotelian educational agenda was perhaps underplayed in the early days of the recent resurgence of character education, as the emphasis was put on the small steps that could be taken to improve character provisions within schools. However, bearing in mind that human flourishing is the foundational concept in character education rather than character, the recent turn towards flourishing as the general aim of education (de Ruyter et al., 2022; Kristjánsson, 2020) has driven a clear conceptual wedge between those who see educational reform towards character as small-scale and incremental, and those who see it as sweeping and radical. The OECD’s flirtations with the idea of abandoning the crudely utilitarian human-capital theory about the aims of education from the twentieth century and replacing it with a flourishing theory (Stevenson, 2022) go so explicitly against the grain of ‘modern’ educational thinking that they cannot be counted as anything but radical.

Another meaning of ‘conservative’ is simply ‘inspired by, or in line with, the agenda of conservative political parties’. If that is the complaint lodged against neo-Aristotelian character education, it is clearly a myth. Adherence to the
tenets of neo-Aristotelian character education transcends any party-political commitments, as can be seen from the fact that character education has received positive attention and support from both the Labour and Conservative parties at different times in the UK. The recent volume about character education in Europe (Fernández et al., 2024) reflects this variance, as some of the chapters are clearly written by scholars who lean towards politically conservative views, while others are typical progressives.

Myth 8: ‘Character, Virtue and Virtue Education are Individualistic Notions.’

The first thing said about this objection in 2013, but not the last, was that it sounds paradoxical, as Aristotle has historically received critical attention for his political collectivism rather than his individualism. It was further suggested that the accusation of an individualist bias might mix up developmental and logical considerations. Neo-Aristotelians do think that character development needs to begin with small-scale interactions in the home and the preschool and be extended later to the wider, out-group contexts. However, this does not mean that, at the advanced stage, character education is just about the ‘fixing’ of individual traits and not about socio-political improvement.

Recent years have seen theoretical developments within neo-Aristotelian character education that have brought this point into sharper relief. First, deeper analyses of Aristotle’s own view of the teleological primacy of the political over the moral (Kristjánsson, 2022a) and of the proper interplay between character education and citizenship education in the contemporary world, according to a neo-Aristotelian perspective (Peterson, 2020a), have added further support to the 2013 claim that the individualism-bias objection is a mere myth – at least when directed against neo-Aristotelian character education, but not other forms, such as the positive psychological one.9 Space precludes a detailed examination of the social and collective basis – indeed necessity – of character education, but the idea that virtues are inherently social and relational remains a central tenet of neo-Aristotelian character education, while a recent study conducted by the Jubilee Centre found that school leaders, teachers and pupils of different ages understood moral, and to a lesser extent intellectual, virtues to be central for being a good citizen and playing a positive role in communities (Peterson et al., 2022).

Secondly, the rising interest in human flourishing as a political as well as an educational aim has foregrounded the fact that any account of flourishing that can be categorised as remotely Aristotelian must take account of large societal and economic considerations and, in the educational arena, must cover wide school-system policies rather than just efforts by individual teachers in individual classrooms (Curren, 2013; Kristjánsson, 2020). The state of the art on those issues within contemporary character education is very different from the situation in the USA in the 1980s–1990s when character education suffered
doctrinal dismemberment from those who considered it to be preoccupied with individual betterment in a political vacuum (Kohn, 1997).

**Myth 9: ‘Character and Virtue are Essentially Relative Notions.’**

The 2013 article devoted most space to discussing the relativity objection in the context of cultural relativism, offering standard philosophical objections to it and presenting Aristotle’s ‘thick but vague’ (Nussbaum, 1990) conception of the human good as an antidote.

Soon after the publication of the 2013 article, research findings from positive psychology bolstered the case against the cultural relativity of the virtues, when McGrath (2015) demonstrated the universality in virtue ratings across 75 countries. That said, the issue of the universality versus locality of virtues continues to engender heated debate, which sometimes seems to be deadlocked. Owen Flanagan’s (2016) masterful study of the ‘geography of morals’ thus provided grist for the mill of those who warn character educationists against neglecting subtle cultural differences in understandings and manifestations of virtue.

A mundane assertion, but one probably close to the truth, is that the universality and locality theses are both credible and, indeed, compatible, if one contextualises them with respect to the research lens that one is using (see, e.g., Webber, 2021). If the lens is a wide-angle one, focusing on broad-brush conceptualisations and manifestations of a virtue such as compassion, one is likely to see only its universal features: for example, everyone will feel compassion for the parents of a drowned child. If, on the other hand, we apply a zoom lens to particular cultures, sub-cultures, or even localised institutional set-ups – say, the adherents of a certain ideology or religion in a certain cultural context – one is likely to notice fine-grained differences in the way in which an apparently universal virtue like compassion is conceptualised, cultivated, and presented. Even two apparently similar cultures, such as the UK and USA, can display differences in the ways in which they characterise a standard virtue like gratitude (Morgan et al., 2014). Moreover, and as touched upon earlier, language is a relevant factor at play, given that certain characterological terms do not always have direct translation into other languages.

If we choose to follow the script from the historical Aristotle, we also need to pay attention to a relevant distinction between moral and civic or political virtues. Justice or fairness qua moral virtue would assume universal features, according to Aristotle, when applied to small-scale, in-group situations. For example, parents in all cultures will teach their children to exhibit fairness – on a universalist understanding – in sharing toys with their siblings. However, in wider out-group situations, justice qua political virtue may differ between constitutions, as justice needs to take account of the reigning laws of each land, and those are clearly not uniform across the world (Kristjánsson, 2022a). All in all, while the relativity
objection is far from being fatal to neo-Aristotelian character education – and can even, in its radical form at least, be categorised as a myth – character educationists must be alert to the need for multiculturally sensitive conceptualisations of virtue that respect diversity and difference (Lu, 2024).

Myth 10: ‘Character and Virtue are Entirely Situation-Specific.’

In 2013, situationism held more sway in moral philosophy and moral psychology than it does today. The 2013 article offered standard Aristotelian ripostes to situationism. Firstly, the famous psychological experiments that were meant to show that all so-called virtue-based activity is wholly situation-dependent (such as the Milgram experiments) relied on a very un-Aristotelian behaviouristic understanding of virtue. For Aristotelians, it does not suffice to see what people do or refrain from doing; we need to know why they act or fail to act. Once we evaluate action-intention ‘combos’, rather than mere behaviour, much of the apparent situation variance may disappear. Second, situationism relied on a very specific understanding of the concept of a ‘situation’ as broad, passive, extraordinary, and/or involving strong social expectations of compliance. After tilting the evidence in their favour in this way, it is no surprise that the experiments designed by the situationists yielded the findings that they did.

More important perhaps, were the subsequent empirical findings from Wake Forest University, showing that if virtue tendencies are categorised as ‘density distributions’ and agents are followed over stretches of time, the apparent in-person variance in virtuous or non-virtuous behaviour becomes reduced to what we normally find with other stable individual traits, such as the Big-Five (Jayawickreme et al., 2019). In sum, the situationism debate is a good example of how a combination of philosophical arguments and empirical evidence can put a psychological thesis to rest.

After the 2013 article was written and situationism began to wane in prominence, it became overtaken in popularity by another potentially subversive thesis: social intuitionism. According to this thesis, so-called virtuous behaviour is driven by emotional responses (ultimately genetically created but subtly modified by culture) that have nothing to do with any rational decision-making (such as phronesis), but where rationality is evoked post hoc simply to rationalise innate responses and make them look good (Haidt, 2001). The standard Aristotelian response to social intuitionism is to accept the empirical claim about the emotion-driven automaticity of many, perhaps most, of our virtuous responses, but to offer a radically alternative explanation from that of the social intuitionists, by arguing that the automatic responses are, in the case of the truly virtuous, the outcome of proper upbringing and repeated personal choices that have congealed into automatic schemas. Those schemas can then be seen as genuinely phronetic, although they do not require autonomous deliberation in each particular case, given that most of the situations we
encounter on a daily basis are familiar, predictable, and repeatable ones (Kristjánsson, 2022b).

4. New Misgivings and Myths
The 2013 article closed by acknowledging three ‘well-founded misgivings’ about then-current character education. Those had to do with a) lack of interdisciplinary research in character education that did not bode well for future work in the area; b) lack of a clear empirical methodology to study and measure character that threatened to befog research efforts; and c) lack of empirical evidence about what really ‘works’ in this area.

It is fair to say that none of those misgivings poses a serious challenge to neo-Aristotelian character education anymore (although responding to some of them is still work in progress). The reasons for that should have already become apparent in the preceding discussion. To rehearse and sum up, interdisciplinary work on character has blossomed in the last decade. In addition to the endeavours of the Jubilee Centre, which from the outset have crossed and integrated various disciplines, some of the most important publications in recent years have been co-written by academics representing different disciplines (see, e.g., Fowers et al., 2024; Wright et al., 2021). Second, as became evident in response to Myth 1 above, we now have a much clearer grasp of what virtue really is and how to analyse and evaluate it componentially (Darnell et al., 2022; Harrison and Polizzi, 2021; McLoughlin et al., 2024; Morgan et al., 2017; Wright et al., 2021). Thirdly, evidence about what works in character education (in primary, secondary, and tertiary settings) has been accumulating, both in terms of what meticulously designed studies show and what practitioners think (Arthur et al., 2022; Brown et al., 2023; Lamb et al., 2021).

However, new times elicit new issues, and in the remainder of this article we turn the spotlight to some recent challenges, with which some would say character education has not engaged sufficiently so far, or is even unable to deal with for various theoretical or practical reasons. We single out some of those challenges below, and in doing so consider which aspects of each claim might be considered a ‘myth’ and which aspect a ‘well-founded misgiving’ in need of further theoretical and empirical investigation.

i. ‘Character, and therefore character education, is not able to respond to pressing democratic discontents prevalent today, such as polarisation.’

For all the attention advocates of character education have paid to the social and political bases of character education, the potential for character to play a positive role in democracies today remains contentious. We have touched upon this contention earlier in this paper, suggesting (as we have elsewhere) that
the charge that neo-Aristotelian forms of character education are overly individualistic and ignore structural inequalities remains a myth. This said, there is clearly work to do by advocates of character education to dispel misgivings about the political nature of character education and to spell out more fully how character and virtues offer hope for democratic civic life today. In this regards, the following five considerations provide an important basis from which to start.

First, there exists something of a paradox in that many of the discontents with democratic life today are commonly identified as involving an absence of virtue (a lack of trust, a lack of civility, a lack of open mindedness, a lack of care, and so on) and the presence of vice (hubris, dishonesty, greed, selfishness, and so on); yet, at the same time, critics of character and character education are sceptical that a turn to character and virtues would represent a positive move.

Second, both generally and specifically in education, democratic dispositions are afforded different terms (skills, values, competencies, attitudes, dispositions, virtues). To repeat from earlier, while these semantic variations might make sense where historical connotations render certain terms problematic, there is also positive potential in recognising the more problematic vestiges and replacing these with more positive, hopeful, and inclusive meanings.

Third, further empirical evidence is needed that provides insight into how schools, teachers, and pupils operationalise the civic and political aspects of character education, for example through integrating character and citizenship education. There is some evidence, for instance, both from within (Peterson et al., 2022) and outside of (Body et al., 2024) the Jubilee Centre that sharp distinctions between character and citizenship education are not observed in actual practice and experiences in schools. Such research provides a useful reminder of the potential for building bridges between character and citizenship, and should act as a prompt for further investigation.

Fourth, there may well be rather serious misgivings about the extent to which notions of character and virtues (and, indeed, of human flourishing) can act as a basis of for consensus about the common good in plural democracies beyond anything more than a very general level. For instance, while there may be a general view that a particular designated group within society (those living in poverty, those seeking asylum, for instance) be treated with kindness and compassion, precisely what the kind and compassionate action might be remains a much more contested matter.

Fifth, and connected to the fourth point, misgivings are also apparent regarding the radical potential of character education to seriously address ongoing structural injustices. Whether critics subscribe to a stronger view (i.e., that a focus on character and virtues is part of the problem) or a more moderate view (i.e., that while not part of the problem, character and virtues are not part of the solution), the misgiving targets the need for greater educational attention to directly challenging injustices, whether through a focus on identity, activism, and/or human rights, for instance. In response to this misgiving,
advocates of neo-Aristotelian character education have typically taken two tacks. One, considered in brief earlier, is to point to the inherently radical nature and potential of a neo-Aristotelian approach. The other is to play down the extent of the radicality, and to suggest that, rather than encouraging sweeping change, the appeal to character and character education rests on more incremental and consensual change (see Peterson, 2020b). Though there is no need for uniformity, some greater consistency between advocates of character education may serve to reduce this particular misgiving.

ii. ‘We know very little about how character education in schools relates to, and impacts, activities beyond schools.’

An important misgiving about character more generally is the extent to which virtue-guided action translates across domains. In other words, while one might be, say, a virtuous doctor, being so does not necessarily entail that one is a virtuous spouse, parent, or neighbour. Transferred to education, this misgiving is of particular concern. Not least, while the primary intention of teachers is likely to be that their pupils form and express good character within the school (they are/become, for example, honest pupils, kind pupils, civil pupils, curious pupils, and so on), most if not all teachers will also have a view to how pupils conduct themselves beyond the school (whether that is during or after pupils’ time in formal education). Here, a leading example might be the connection between character and sport. While there remains more assertion than actual empirical evidence about the potential of sport to develop character, the key point is that endeavours to cultivate character in schools are at best diminished, and are perhaps even futile, if the associated positive conduct is not transferred to other domains of pupils’ lives, such as their sporting lives. Such transferral across domains would by necessity also need to account for differences in contextual ethical norms between sports, such as those relating to ‘acceptable’ conduct. The central observation here is that in some sports, such as football, virtuous conduct can require acting against what is generally taken to be ‘acceptable’ conduct (of which the professional foul is a leading example), placing additional demands on the character of pupils.

Of particular professional and practical relevance is the extent to which schools are able actively to draw meaningful connections between their provision of character education and pupils’ lives beyond the school. To draw again on sport (though the point would hold for other activities), even if we accept that such connections actually fall into the remit of schools, teachers might simply be unaware of what experiences pupils have of sport outside of school. Even if teachers were aware of it, it is not altogether clear whether, or how, teachers would seek to address a situation in which they become aware of clearly negative influences on their pupils’ character operating within an outside club. More understanding, then, is needed regarding the complex interplay of
social organisms that influence the development of character, including the boundaries (conceptual and applied) that can realistically be drawn in terms of the spheres of influence of schools and teachers.

iii. ‘Advocates have not fully detailed how character education can be appropriately adapted to ensure full inclusivity for pupils living with special educational needs and disabilities.’

While noting some exceptions (Cureton, 2022; Lehr et al., 2007), despite the groundswell of research and practical resources that have become available since the original ten-myths paper, there remains a distinct and significant lack of attention paid to character education with and for pupils living with special educational needs and disabilities. This lack of evidence challenges the extent to which recent work on character education can be truly deemed as inclusive. Lehr et al. (2007, p. 72) offered two ways that students living with disabilities can ‘contribute substantially’ to character education in school. First, ‘by serving as exemplars of strength and character despite obstacles’ and, second, ‘by requiring teachers to plan, implement and evaluate programs appropriate for a wide range of student abilities, thus modelling behaviours of inclusion and likely enhancing teachers’ ability to more effectively teach all students the character education curriculum’. While the first contribution is somewhat a vestige of its time (beginning of the 21st century) and would be questionable today, the second points to the importance of building a fully inclusive form of character education that appreciates the agency of all pupils. To put things in simple terms, the provision of character education in a school in pursuit of belonging, purpose, and community for all falls at the first hurdle if given groups of pupils are not able to access that belonging, purpose, and community on their own terms and in concert with the terms of others. Crucial in this regard is the need to move beyond certain myths that can carry over into character education. Perhaps the most common of these is the outdated and tired view that those with certain forms of autism may not be able to develop the empathy so central to virtues such as kindness and compassion.

Even more pressing to address this misgiving is the need to give more serious and concerted attention not only to how practical instantiations of neo-Aristotelian character education can fully recognise and include those living with special needs and disabilities, but also to how even well-intentioned discussions can effectively exclude. Two cases in point illustrate this need, further research on which will be vital to addressing the misgiving. The first, as Cureton (2022, p. 494) has argued, is the importance of paying due attention to the ‘host of moral problems’ faced by students with disabilities ‘that most of their peers do not have to worry about’. The second is the need for greater clarity and understanding about what constitutes flourishing for those with life-
limiting and life-ending conditions, particularly given the importance for flourishing attached, in most formulations, to mental and physical health.

5. Where is Character Education Heading? Future Challenges and Opportunities

Character education, both as an idea and as a practice, continues to witness a resurgence. If the character-and-virtue research agenda is to remain pertinent, it must demonstrate how it can help address both current and forthcoming threats to human flourishing that are unleashing a host of new ethical dilemmas. Threats include, alongside those outlined in the section above: the surge in mental health concerns; the swift emergence of GenAI and associated novel technologies; escalating fears about environmental sustainability and the fragmentation of the moral ecology underlying healthy character development. This concluding section briefly considers the battle to remain relevant, by providing a summary of the challenges and opportunities for character-education researchers, policy makers, and practitioners, before finishing with some comments on where the field might be heading.

This article has sought to not only revisit and reconsider the ten myths from the 2013 article but also update these in light of new developments. In this sense, the article has a similar aim to its predecessor in that it continues to make the argument that the ‘objections underlying the 10 myths are not serious stumbling blocks to the aim of virtue education’ (Kristjánsson, 2013). Although these myths remain present in some quarters, new evidence has been presented to further rebuff claims that notions of character, virtue, and virtue education are unclear, redundant, old-fashioned, religious, paternalistic, anti-democratic, conservative, individualistic, relative, and situation-dependent. The updated synopsis of the current state of the field provides additional ammunition for those inclined to advocate for it.

This article has a more pressing aim than simply providing an update on the state of play, bounded by a discussion of the ten myths outlined previously. The 2013 article concluded with a call for ‘a substantive dose of intellectual modesty’, and heeding this advice in the section above a new set of contemporary misgivings were outlined that provide serious food for thought for champions of character and character education. These relate to concerns about: if character education can help address democratic discontents that often lead to polarisation; if character education ideas translate across domains; and if character education can be truly inclusive. In the article, we have offered an outline of these concerns and some initial ideas to support those seeking to address them.

Our collective desire to continue to address the myths as they arise and tackle misgivings should bolster the substantial global attention character education has gained over the past decade, bringing with it insights into the nature of character and virtues from a greater number of disciplines and the emergence
of new sub-disciplines. For example, there is a growing body of researchers who contest the often-cited fear that new technologies spell the end for humanity as we know it. Whilst AI will undoubtedly change what we do, it also presents a compelling case that we must hold onto what we cherish, what makes us human. After all, it is our character that largely marks us out from the machines and will perhaps make human virtues even more prized. Furthermore, researchers are increasingly demonstrating the potential for new and emerging technologies, such as VR, gaming, and smart phones, to be deployed as part of the character educators’ toolkit (Harrison, 2022). In this sense character education is not only a partial antidote to the seemingly non-stop march of technological innovation, we can also gain some solace in the technologies themselves if they are appropriately aligned towards enhancing human flourishing.

All this said, the big question remains from the 2013 article: can theorists from philosophy, moral and developmental psychology, education, sociology, theology, history, and the health and technology sciences learn from each others’ work in order to offer serious rebuttals to myths about character and character education as and when they emerge? Our hope is that researchers continue to develop compelling arguments that embolden the growing band of policy-makers and practitioners who see character development as part of the answer to addressing the most pressing local, national, and global challenges of the day.

6. Disclosure Statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

7. OrCId
Kristján Kristjánsson http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8584-4178

8. Notes
1 A slightly revised, and shorter, version of this article appeared as Chapter 2 in Kristjánsson (2015).
2 Evidence shows the growth of schools rated ‘outstanding’ who prioritise character education as their underpinning philosophy. See https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Outstanding-Schools-Character-Education-and-School-Improvement-1.pdf.
3 https://character-education.org.uk.
5 Notably, Wright et al. (2021) speak positively about the Jubilee Centre’s model of practical wisdom, and Fowers et al. (2024) draw explicitly on conceptual work on virtue constructs within the Centre (Morgan et al., 2017).
6 All forms of character education will involve some philosophical assumptions, although not necessarily the same as neo-Aristotelian character education. The idea that, for instance, some positive psychologists seem to have about being able to keep...
their hands clean of philosophy and simply rely on empirical data about what is ‘valued’, rather than what is ‘valuable’, is a chimera (see, e.g., Gulliford, 2020).

Notice the variance in views of character educationists on their subject, as identified in McGrath et al. (2022).

For example, the language of character education is increasingly being used in Ofsted inspection reports. Less than 1% of reports for schools rated ‘outstanding’ and inspected between 1st September 2011 and 31st August 2012 include the term ‘character’ and/or ‘virtue’. In comparison, a decade later, almost 14% of reports for schools rated ‘outstanding’ and inspected between 1st September 2021 and 31st August 2022 include the term ‘character’ and/or ‘virtue’. See https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/OutstandingSchools-1.pdf.

Many positive psychologists would urge that this objection does not hit at their model either, but arguing for or against the claim is outside the purview of the present article.

9. References


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Correspondence
Kristján Kristjánsson
Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston Campus, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK.

Email: k.kristjansson@bham.ac.uk