The Varieties of Character and Some Implications for Character Education

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Abstract

The moral and civic dimensions of personal character have been widely recognized and explored. Recent work by philosophers, psychologists, and education theorists has drawn attention to two additional dimensions of character: intellectual character and “performance” character. This article sketches a “four-dimensional” conceptual model of personal character and some of the character strengths or “virtues” proper to each dimension. In addition to exploring how the dimensions of character are related to each other, the article also examines the implications of this account for character education undertaken in a youth or adolescent context. It is argued that “intellectual character education,” which emphasizes the development of intellectual virtues like curiosity, open-mindedness, and intellectual courage, is an underexplored but especially promising approach in this context. The relationship between intellectual character education and traditional character education, which emphasizes the development of moral and civic virtues like kindness, generosity, and tolerance, is also explored.

Key Words: varieties of character; moral virtues; civic virtues; intellectual virtues; performance virtues; character education.
Introduction

As Aristotle explains in books II-IV of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, a person’s character is comprised of her dispositions to act, think, and feel in various ways. Such ways can be good or bad. A person disposed to tell lies, think of himself as more important than others, and feel unhappy when others succeed exhibits deficient character. In particular, he exhibits character *vices* like dishonesty, arrogance, and envy. By contrast, one who gives generously of his resources, interprets the actions of others in a charitable light, and is pained by others’ suffering exhibits character strengths or *virtues* like generosity, charity, and compassion.

The dimension of personal character just illustrated is *moral* or *ethical* in nature. However, personal character is also widely regarded as admitting of a *civic* dimension. For members of civil society, living well or “flourishing” often involves engaging in civic activities like caring for shared spaces, keeping informed about issues affecting one’s local community or broader society, engaging in political discourse, and voting. Doing these things well or responsibly demands the practice of civic virtues such as tolerance, respect, community-mindedness, and civility in public discourse (see Shields, 2012).

For simplicity, moral character can be thought of as the character one possesses *qua* “neighbor” (in roughly the biblical sense) and civic character as the character one possesses *qua* citizen. Corresponding to this, moral virtues can be thought of as the character strengths of a good neighbor and civic virtues as the character strengths of a good citizen. Again, the former include qualities like generosity, charity, and compassion, while and the latter include tolerance, community-mindedness, and civility. These dimensions of personal character overlap and intersect; however, neither is identical or reducible to the other.
A cursory review of the philosophical and psychological literature on character and virtue leading up to the late 20th century suggests that one’s moral and civic character constitute the whole of one’s character, that is, that there are two and only two dimensions of personal character. More recently, however, philosophers, psychologists, education theorists, and others have drawn attention to additional dimensions of character and to the virtues (and vices) proper to these dimensions. The present article draws on some of this work to sketch a fuller account of personal character. Specifically, it addresses two further dimensions of personal character: performance character and intellectual character. While these dimensions of character are the primary focus of the article, their relationships to moral and civic character are also discussed. The resulting conceptual model primarily specifies the dimensions of character in their adult forms. However, it has implications for an understanding of youth and adolescent development, particularly within an education context, for the virtues at the center of the model are among the qualities that a good elementary and secondary education is thought to foster. Accordingly, the model can serve to help situate and guide theoretical and intervention-based work in K-12 character education.

Two additional preliminary points are in order. First, the approach taken in this article is primarily philosophical or conceptual (rather than empirical) in nature. Empirical research on character or on specific virtues necessarily proceeds on the basis of a particular conceptualization of the target phenomena. Such conceptualizations can be better or worse from a philosophical standpoint (they can be more or less coherent, consistent, precise, etc.). The aim of this article is to provide a plausible and illuminating philosophical or conceptual account of several dimensions of character and of the virtues proper to these dimensions—an account that can be
used in (and refined in light of) the development or assessment of empirical work on these topics.

Second, the four characterological domains identified here (viz., moral, civic, performance, and intellectual) are not intended to be mutually exclusive. As will become clear, the domains overlap in interesting and complex ways. Consequently, it should not be surprising if some attributes (e.g., respect or open-mindedness) turn out to be virtues of more than one kind. Further, the account is entirely consistent with the possibility of additional varieties of character or virtue beyond the ones addressed here (e.g., aesthetic or spiritual virtue). Neither, then, is the model intended to be exhaustive or complete.

**Performance Virtues**

Education theorists have been prominent among the various groups of scholars recently interested in the notions of character and virtue. Two such theorists, Thomas Lickona and Matthew Davidson (2005, pp. 16-31), have drawn attention to a dimension of character they regard as important to elementary and secondary education but different from moral and civic character. They refer to this as “performance character.” Performance character pertains to “the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dispositions needed to achieve human excellence in performance environments—in school, extracurricular activities, and work” (Davidson, 2004). In such environments, success often requires the practice of “performance virtues” such as tenacity, self-discipline, resilience, patience, and “grit.” In short, performance virtues equip K-12 students
(and others) to successfully complete challenging and complex tasks across a wide range of contexts.²

Performance virtues differ from moral virtues and civic virtues in some important respects. First, moral and civic virtues can be understood at least partly in terms of their respective characteristic motivation. Many virtue ethicists, for example, think of moral virtues as rooted in a concern with certain distinctively moral goods or values, such as the well-being of another person or the alleviation of pain and suffering (see Battaly, 2015, and Slote, 2001). Put slightly differently, a morally virtuous person engages in morally relevant activity (e.g., generous giving or compassionate listening) out of a concern with the well-being of another person or an attempt to reduce another person’s suffering.³ Furthermore, the concern or motivation characteristic of moral virtues is partly intrinsic, meaning that a morally virtuous person cares about the well-being or mental states of others at least partly as ends in themselves (not merely

² As this description suggests, the educational scholarship on performance character draws heavily on work in positive psychology and related areas of research, for example, on work by Seligman and Peterson (2004) and Angela Duckworth (2009). It also aligns with work on what philosophers sometimes refer to as “structural virtues” (Adams, 2006) or “virtues of will power” (Roberts, 1984).

³ In fact, this point is trickier than it might seem. For instance, getting clear on what exactly counts as a moral good is a serious challenge, one that may be impossible to settle in a non-stipulative manner. Moreover, some philosophers have conceived of moral virtues as including some self-regarding qualities—e.g., temperance. This complicates thinking about moral virtues as the character strengths of a good neighbor. For more on this, see Baehr, 2011, Appendix.
as a *means* to other, amoral or even immoral objectives). If one is concerned with the well-being of another, but only as a way of currying favor with this person or impressing others, then the actions that “flow” from this motivation will not manifest a genuine moral virtue (see Battaly, 2015, Ch. 3, and Baehr, 2011, Ch. 6.).

Similarly, civic virtues arise from a concern with certain distinctively civic goods or ends, such as the well-being of one’s community or society as a whole. The civically virtuous person respects other people’s property and participates in civic affairs because she cares about—and cares about at least partly for its own sake—the overall well-being of her community. In the case of both moral virtues and civic virtues, the element of intrinsic motivation is part of what gives the qualities in question their status as virtues (see Adams, 2006, and Hurka, 2001).

Performance virtues are different in this respect. They lack a univocal underlying motivation. Rather, patience, self-discipline, perseverance, and so on can and do aim at a rather diverse range of ends, including ends that are *bad* (see Roberts, 1984). A corporate criminal, for instance, might show remarkable patience and self-discipline in his attempts to defraud thousands of clients or to inflict suffering and failure on his competition. Performance virtues are virtues, not because they necessarily involve an element of good or admirable motivation, but rather because of their *usefulness* in executing challenging and complex tasks (see Davidson, 2004, and Davidson and Lickona, 2005). The difference between moral and civic virtues, on the one hand, and performance virtues, on the other, also is evident in the related fact that one can possess high levels of the latter while possessing low levels of the former. Again, a criminal mastermind might be extraordinarily patient, persevering, resilient, and the like, while also being merciless, cruel, intolerant, and indifferent to the public good. As Scott Seider remarks,
performance strengths can be thought of as “the qualities possessed by entrepreneurs and politicians rather than activists or moral exemplars” (2012, p. 3).

Given this characterization, it might be wondered whether performance virtues employed in the service of bad ends should really be considered virtues at all. If by “virtue” here one means a quality that is broadly morally valuable, then the very notion of “performance virtues” is bound to seem problematic. However, in the most general sense, a virtue is a simply an excellence, and an attribute of personal character can be good or excellent strictly on account of being useful. Therefore, on a broad, morally neutral way of thinking about what it is for something to be a virtue, the idea of performance virtues remains coherent.

While the possession of performance virtues is consistent with the possession of immoral motives, performance virtues are not inherently morally suspect. On the contrary, while they can be rooted in a concern with evil ends, they can—and often are—at the heart of worthy pursuits. Indeed, many important moral and civic goods are such that they can be achieved only by way of the practice of performance virtues. For instance, maintaining a good relationship with one’s friends or loved ones can require considerable patience, self-control, and perseverance. Likewise for the building of a just or peaceful state. Thus while performance virtues are not the same thing as moral or civic virtues, they often and importantly “double” as such. (For more on the evaluative status of performance virtues, see Berkowitz and Puka, 2009, p. 108.)

Finally, while performance virtues can also be moral or civic virtues, the latter are not exhausted by properly motivated performance virtues. In other words, some moral virtues and civic virtues are distinct from any performance virtues (whether morally or civically motivated). Compassion and empathy, for instance, are central moral virtues but are not performance virtues. The same goes for familiar civic virtues like community-mindedness and tolerance.
Intellectual Virtues

Along with education theorists and psychologists, philosophers have also had much to say about character and virtue. And here as well the overwhelming majority of discussions have been about moral and civic virtues. Recently, however, philosophers working in the area of “virtue epistemology” have drawn attention to a further, sorely neglected dimension of character: namely, intellectual character. (For some representative works, see Zagzebski, 1996, or Roberts and Wood, 2007. For a systematic overview, see Baehr, 2011, Chs. 1-2.)

A person’s intellectual character is comprised of her dispositions to act, think, and feel in an epistemic context, that is, in the context of pursuing and transmitting epistemic goods like truth, knowledge, and understanding. This includes activities such as scientific inquiry, journalistic reporting, and academic teaching and learning. Accordingly, intellectual virtues are the character strengths of a good thinker or learner. They include qualities like curiosity, open-mindedness, attentiveness, intellectual carefulness, and intellectual thoroughness. (For discussions of several specific virtues, see Roberts and Wood, 2007, Chs. 6-12).

As this list suggests, intellectual virtues should not be confused with natural intellectual abilities or with “intelligence” as this notion is often understood. (Some virtue epistemologists think of intellectual virtues as reliable cognitive faculties like memory, vision, and reason, and in doing resist a sharp distinction between natural intellectual abilities and intellectual virtues. For an example of this “reliabilist” approach to virtue epistemology, see Sosa, 2007.) As any experienced teacher knows, a student can be naturally very bright or intellectually “gifted” while also being intellectually arrogant, hasty, lazy, or dishonest, that is, while possessing several
intellectual vices (for a related example, see Roberts and Wood’s discussion of James Watson and Frances Crick in 2007, Ch. 9). Likewise, a student who naturally struggles in a certain area can sometimes compensate for this limitation by practicing virtues like intellectual carefulness, thoroughness, and tenacity. While capacities like intelligence or IQ partially constitute a person’s natural cognitive endowment, intellectual virtues comprise a kind of “second (intellectual) nature,” for they are dispositions cultivated over time and through a complex process of social influences, imitation, and practice. (For recent work integrating philosophical and psychological perspectives on how virtues are formed, see Snow, 2015).

Intellectual virtues are structurally similar to moral and civic virtues, inasmuch as they can be understood (partly) in terms of a univocal underlying motivation: namely, an intrinsic concern with epistemic goods like knowledge, truth, and understanding (see e.g., Zagzebski, 1996, pp. 166-210; Baehr, 2011, Ch. 6, and Battaly 2015, Ch. 3). Further, intellectual virtues intersect with moral virtues given that treating others with, say, love and respect often demands a show of qualities like attentiveness to the other person’s well-being or open-minded consideration of another person’s opinions and input. They also intersect with civic virtues given that civically virtuous behaviors often involve virtuous intellectual activity like a careful, thorough, and honest assessment of diverse political positions and arguments (see, e.g., Hazlett, 2016).4

4 It bears noting that the “intersection” between intellectual virtues, on the one hand, and moral and civic virtues, on the other, is somewhat different than the intersection between intellectual virtues and performance virtues. Moral and civic virtues cannot function as intellectual virtues in quite the same way that performance virtues can. This is because moral and civic virtues by
However, intellectual virtues can diverge from both moral and civic virtues. It is not difficult to imagine a scientist who is, say, deeply curious, conducts his research in an assiduous and thorough manner, and is highly intellectually autonomous, but who also is relatively unmoved by the suffering of others (and thereby is deficient in moral virtue) or who does little to benefit or participate in the life of his community (and thereby is deficient in civic virtue). Conversely, not every exemplar of moral or civic virtue is especially curious or intellectually thorough or persevering. This illustrates the point that a given level of intellectual virtue is no guarantee of an equal level of moral or civic virtue. (It does not follow, however, that a person can be fully or even highly virtuous along one dimension of virtue while possessing no virtue whatsoever along another dimension. For more on this point, see Baehr, 2011, Appendix.) The differences between these types of virtues is attributable, at least in part, to the differences between their characteristic underlying motivations. Again, a person can care about epistemic goods like truth and understanding without having an equal concern for the well-being of those closest to him or the good of his community or society as a whole.

Intellectual virtues are related to performance virtues in much the same way that moral and civic virtues are related to performance virtues. First, performance virtues can also be intellectual virtues when they are rooted in a concern with epistemic goods. So, for instance, when a journalist manifests tenacity or grit in her pursuit of the truth or when a student demonstrates patience and self-discipline in his efforts to master a challenging subject matter, he or she exhibits qualities that are at once intellectual virtues and performance virtues. Second, it definition involve a characteristic motivation different from that of intellectual virtues (whereas, with performance virtues, the corresponding motivation is “open”).
remains that not all intellectual virtues are epistemically-motivated performance virtues. Rather, just as compassion is a moral virtue but not a performance virtue, qualities like curiosity, open-mindedness, and intellectual humility are intellectual virtues but not performance virtues. Thus an important distinction remains between intellectual virtues and performance virtues.\textsuperscript{5}

To summarize some of the key conclusions arrived at thus far:

(1) Moral virtues (e.g., kindness and compassion) can be thought of as the character strengths of a good “neighbor” and are motivated by a concern with distinctively moral goods such as the alleviation of another person’s suffering.

(2) Civic virtues (e.g., tolerance and civility) are the character strengths of a good citizen and are motivated by a concern with distinctively civic goods such as the well-being of society as a whole.

\textsuperscript{5} Of course, the notion of “performance character” could be given a broad construal, such that it covers any dimension of character that is not moral or civic. Such a construal, however, would seriously dilute the notion of performance character. Further, it would run afoul of the plausible idea that intellectual virtues, arising as they do from a positive orientation toward “epistemic goods,” gain their status as such at least partly on account of an element of virtuous or admirable motivation (whereas, by definition, performance virtues derive their status as virtues on other, non-motivational grounds). For more on this point, see Baehr, 2011, Chs. 6-7.
(3) Intellectual virtues (e.g., curiosity and intellectual courage) are the character strengths of a good thinker or learner and are motivated by a concern with distinctively epistemic goods like truth or understanding.

(4) Performance virtues (e.g., self-control and perseverance) receive their status as virtues, not on account of any common underlying motivation, but rather because they enable their possessor to successfully complete complex and challenging tasks across a range of “performance” contexts (e.g., from school to work to athletics). That said, performance virtues can double as moral, civic, or intellectual virtues when they are motivated by the concerns or ends proper to these other types of virtues.

It might be wondered whether the distinctions that have been draw between the four types of virtues are equally “deep” or whether the virtue-types themselves are equally “real,” philosophically or psychologically. Drawing on Aristotle’s discussion in Book VI of the Nicomachean Ethics, for instance, it might be argued that in fact there is only one main distinction to be drawn in this vicinity, namely, the distinction between moral virtues and intellectual virtues, with the categories of civic virtues and performance virtues being somehow ancillary to or derivative from these other categories.\(^6\)

This is a complex issue that in the present context can be addressed only in a fairly cursory manner. It has been shown that performance virtues are structurally different from the other three types of virtues. Again, the latter can be understood in terms of the kind of ends at

\(^6\) Thanks to Ben Kotzee for raising this question.
which they aim, while performance virtues are defined, not in terms of any specific end or goal, but rather in terms of their *usefulness* across a range of different context or pursuits. For reasons already noted, this difference does not warrant doubt about whether performance virtues are genuine “virtues,” at least in one familiar and acceptable use of this term. But it could be viewed as supporting the idea that performance virtues are virtues of a “lesser” variety. Furthermore, on a sufficiently broad conception of the “civic,” an argument could be made that, because human persons are inherently political beings, moral virtues are a subset of civic virtues. Alternatively, if the domain of the “moral” is coextensive with human flourishing, and if the pursuit and acquisition of knowledge partly *constitute* human flourishing, then it may turn out that intellectual virtues are a subset of moral virtues (and of civic virtues as well, if moral virtues are themselves a subset of civic virtues). While interesting and worthy of additional philosophical reflection, the present account is neutral with respect to these issues.

As to Aristotle’s particular way of distinguishing between moral virtues and intellectual virtues, it neither supports nor undermines the four-dimensional model put forth here. Aristotle’s distinction is between “virtues of character” or ethical virtues, on the one hand, and “virtues of the intellect” or intellectual virtues, on the other. Notably, the qualities he describes as intellectual virtues (viz., *episteme, techne, phronesis, nous,* and *sophia*) are not attributes of personal character. Instead they are akin to cognitive powers or capacities or to the epistemic states generated by these capacities (Taylor, 1990; Conway, 2000). As such, they exhibit little overlap with intellectual virtues understood as the character strengths of a good thinker, learner, or inquirer. Rather, all four types of virtues discussed above fall within the realm that Aristotle described as “virtues of character.” It should now be clear that Aristotle’s discussion of this realm was incomplete. At a minimum, he failed to explore the ways in which personal character
is tied to the quality of one’s purely epistemic activities. In any case, nothing about his distinction between ethical and intellectual virtues provides grounds for doubting the depth or reality of the virtue-types identified above.

**Virtue as an Educational Aim**

One reason for thinking carefully about the structure of character and virtue concerns their educational significance, particularly in elementary and secondary environments, where students’ identities and characters are more malleable. There is, in any case, a growing sense that education at these levels should be aimed at more than the transmission of knowledge, the honing of cognitive skills, or the achievement of high scores on standardized tests. Increasingly, education theorists and writers, as well as teachers, parents, and students, are insisting that K-12 education should have a deeper, more personal impact on students (as an example and for further documentation, see Tough, 2012).

One expression of this compelling idea is the view that, in addition to transmitting knowledge and skills, education should also aim at fostering moral and civic virtues in society’s youth. In other words, the seemingly impersonal and institutional quality of much K-12 education can be viewed as an argument in support of “traditional” character education, the aim of which is to foster moral and civic virtues in an educational setting (see Lickona, 1991, for a classic work in this area). This suggestion is not without plausibility. However, traditional character education faces certain limitations that bear scrutiny.

The limitations I have in mind are a function of the predominantly academic focus of most elementary and secondary schools (for additional worries about traditional character
education, albeit ones that are of uneven relevance and significance, see Kohn, 1997). Given this focus, a very natural and pressing question is: How can a concern with fostering moral and civic virtues be deeply, effectively, and organically integrated into the activities of elementary and secondary teaching and learning? What might it look like to teach 8th grade math or science, say, with an eye to fostering qualities like kindness, compassion, or community-mindedness? These questions are not purely rhetorical. There is at least some evidence for thinking that elementary and secondary schools can have a favorable impact on the moral and civic character of their students (see Berkowitz and Bier, 2007, for some of the relevant research and practices).

Nevertheless, the prima facie “mismatch” between purely academic teaching and learning, on the one hand, and efforts to foster moral and civic virtues, on the other, should prompt a consideration of other ways of thinking about what character education might look like in an K-12 academic setting.

Perhaps surprisingly, some proponents of traditional character education have raised a similar question and gone some way toward identifying an answer. For example, Lickona, a leading figure in traditional character education, recently commented:

My colleague Matthew Davidson and I wanted to know: What were the best high schools in the country doing to develop good character, even if they didn’t call it “character education”? … Our study of high schools caused a paradigm shift in our thinking about character and character education. As we observed these schools going about their work, it became increasingly clear that that character education isn’t just about helping students become kind, honest, and fair. It’s also about teaching them to work hard, develop their talents, and strive for excellence so that they are equipped to make a
Lickona is here describing the origin of his and Davidson’s interest in the notion of performance character (see as well Lickona and Davidson, 2005, pp. 16-31). While an appreciation of this concept offers a fuller account of the educational significance of character, it does not go far enough. In particular, the construct of performance character, while highlighting some important aspects of character neglected by traditional character education, provides a less comprehensive and accurate account of these aspects than that of intellectual character.

Intellectual virtues and performance virtues can converge in the manner described above. For instance, intellectual virtues include strengths like intellectual tenacity, carefulness, and perseverance, which can be conceived of as performance virtues rooted in a concern with epistemic goods like knowledge and understanding. Accordingly, any plausible approach to “intellectual character education” will include an emphasis on performance virtues of this sort. However, again, the category of intellectual virtues is broader than that of epistemically-motivated performance virtues. Among the more salient intellectual virtues are qualities like curiosity, open-mindedness, intellectual autonomy, and intellectual humility. These additional virtues have clear and central importance to elementary and secondary education—a relevance that could be missed if one were thinking about the characterological bearing of education strictly in terms of performance virtues.
Intellectual Character Education

The emerging picture is one according to which the construct of intellectual character is uniquely well positioned to make sense of the idea that elementary and secondary education—especially *qua* academic enterprise—should have an effect on who young people are becoming as persons, that is, on their character. While it is challenging to know how a focus on virtues like kindness and compassion could be deeply and plausibly integrated into, say, math or science education, it is much less difficult to imagine how these subjects might be taught with the goal of helping K-12 students become more curious, open-minded, attentive, intellectually careful, intellectually thorough, and the like.

This should not be too surprising given that intellectual character is the dimension of the self where cognitive functioning intersects with personal character. Much cognitive functioning is hardwired or falls outside the purview of the will and related psychological capacities and

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7 One can, of course, challenge the idea education should concern itself primarily with academic practices and goals. However, even if the scope of education were broadened so as to incorporate a greater concern with students’ moral or civic formation, say, this would not negate the importance of their epistemic formation, and so would do little to undermine the unique educational significance of intellectual virtues.

8 David Shields (2011) briefly discusses this approach, as does Seider (2012, pp. 231-32). For a fairly comprehensive account of what “intellectual character education” looks like in practice, the best works are (Ritchhart, 2002 and 2015). See (Baehr, 2015) for a downloadable resource guide that draws from Ritchhart’s work and integrates it with work in virtue epistemology.
states. This is true of natural intellectual abilities or “gifts” and of the brute operation of cognitive faculties like vision, hearing, memory, and introspection. However, these are not the whole of our cognitive makeup or functioning. Thinking, reasoning, perceptual, and other cognitive operations can also be affected by a person’s actions, thoughts, attitudes, choices, feelings, and the like, that is, by her character (see Baehr, 2011, Chs. 3-4). Again, the construct of intellectual character picks out precisely this psychological dimension, with intellectual virtues being the “excellences” proper to it. Given the centrality of thinking and learning to the educational enterprise, it should be no surprise that a concern with intellectual character formation would fit naturally and deeply into a proper account of educational aims and practices.

A related point concerns the motivational basis of intellectual virtues. Many K-12 schools profess a commitment to helping their students grow in a “love of learning” or to develop into “lifelong learners.” However, rarely does one find a very rich or illuminating account of what these aspirations amount to. Again, the concept of intellectual virtue provides a compelling answer. Intellectual virtues flow from a love of knowledge or learning. They can also be thought of as the mental habits or character strengths of a “lifelong learner” (Baehr, 2013). Accordingly, to the extent that an elementary or secondary educator is interested in fostering a love of learning in his students or in helping them to develop into lifelong learners, he would do well to take seriously the idea of educating for intellectual virtues.

What is surprising, then, is not so much that a focus on intellectual character should form the basis of a promising approach to character education, but rather that more work—whether theoretical or practical—has not been done in this area (for some recent exceptions, see Battaly, 2006, Kotzee, 2014, and Baehr, 2016).
Before closing, a possible objection to intellectual character education needs to be considered. Perhaps surprisingly, in the address excerpted above, Lickona goes on to express some reservation about having expanded the scope of K-12 character education to include an emphasis performance character. While he stands by the importance of the latter, he laments that many theorists, practitioners, and others have begun thinking about character education strictly in terms of performance character and strengths. They have leapt at the idea of educating for “grit,” for instance, while eschewing the idea of educating for moral virtues. Lickona remarks: “Lesson learned? Don’t underestimate the culture’s preoccupation with achievement and the difficulty of promoting an integrated approach to developing moral and performance character” (2014, p. 14).

It is not difficult to imagine Lickona raising a similar worry about intellectual character education. He might be concerned that by focusing on young people’s development of intellectual virtues, educators will neglect their moral and civic formation. In a similar vein, Marvin Berkowitz, another leading proponent of traditional character education, regularly and approvingly cites Theodore Roosevelt’s cautionary remark: “To educate a man in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace society” (2014). Thus Lickona or Berkowitz might worry that intellectual character education could be entirely successful on its own terms while delivering to society graduates who are seriously morally deficient.

Is such a concern justified? To be sure, it is important to preserve some kind of distinction between intellectual character education and an approach that focuses primarily on fostering moral or civic virtues. There is, after all, a marked difference between educating for qualities like curiosity, open-mindedness, and intellectual tenacity, on the one hand, and
educating for qualities like kindness, compassion, and respect, on the other. Nevertheless, for several reasons, this difference is not as great as it might initially seem. Specifically, there are grounds for thinking that the most effective approaches to intellectual character education will have a robust moral and civic dimension.

First, as indicated above, many intellectual virtues themselves have a moral or civic valence. It is reasonable to expect, for instance, that a student strong in attentiveness and open-mindedness, for instance, will have an easier time engaging with her peers in a morally appropriate manner. Compare such a student with one who is inattentive—who is always distracted, never fully “present,” and therefore not a good listener—or who tends to be close-minded. Similarly, many of the virtues required for competently participating in a deliberative democracy are or are closely related to intellectual virtues. A responsible democratic citizen is curious about the actions of her government and about the public good, seeks out relevant information and sources, and evaluates them carefully, thoroughly, and with an eye to their epistemic features (e.g. whether they are true or false, well-supported or not). Likewise for the kind of public discourse that is central to a well-functioning democracy. Here virtues like open-mindedness, intellectual honesty, intellectual humility, and intellectual courage are critical (see Hazlett, 2016; Nussbaum, 2010). Therefore, to the extent that elementary and secondary schools succeed at nurturing students’ growth in intellectual virtues, their graduates will be well on their way to living morally responsible lives and to becoming engaged, responsible citizens.

Second, on a broad understanding of what counts as “moral,” intellectual virtues themselves have a robustly moral dimension. Intellectual virtues are motivated by a concern with ends like knowledge, truth, and understanding. These are fundamental human goods. Part of what it is to “flourish” or to fulfill one’s potential as a human being is to become educated: to
learn about the complexity of the natural world, understand history, explore different societies and cultures, read and dwell on great works of literature, and so on. Intellectual virtues outfit their possessor to acquire and experience these goods. Given that intellectual virtues contribute to human flourishing in this way, educating for intellectual virtues can be considered a broadly moral endeavor. (As suggested earlier, a case can also be made for thinking that intellectually virtuous activity is itself partly constitutive of human flourishing, for such activity is a form of seeking, loving, attending to important human goods. A theoretical framework for this argument can be found in Adams, 2006. See also Baehr, 2011, Appendix.)

Third, a closely related point is that, given the nature of intellectual virtues, a central part of intellectual character education is to help form young persons in such a way that they become willing and able to submit their minds—their thinking, believing, and other cognitive processes—to “the way things are” or to evidence of the world’s being a particular way. We are not the final arbiters of truth or reality about ourselves, others, or the world around us. This point also has important moral implications. Conducting one’s intellectual activity in intellectually virtuous ways involves being honest and open about oneself (including one’s flaws and mistakes), about the circumstances of others (e.g., the fact that their fundamental well-being is no more important than one’s own), and about one’s duties or obligations to others. In short, intellectual virtues equip students to care about “the facts,” including moral facts about themselves and others. In this respect as well intellectual character education has a positive moral valence.

Fourth, intellectual character education is a profoundly personal enterprise. Particularly at the elementary and secondary levels, it is aimed at shaping students’ fundamental beliefs, attitudes, and feelings about thinking and learning. (For more on how this can be achieved, see
especially Ritchhart, 2002 and 2015. For a defense of intellectual growth as a “realistic”
educational aim, see Baehr, 2016b.) Given its personal nature, it is imperative, especially at the
K-12 level, that intellectual character education be practiced within the framework of caring,
trusting, and respectful relationships. Young people who find themselves in a morally or
psychologically “unsafe” environment will be much less open to revising or altering their
fundamental beliefs and attitudes about thinking and learning. They will also be less likely to
openly and wholeheartedly engage in these activities. (For more on these points, see Porter,
2016; Ritchhart, 2015, Ch. 8; Berkowitz and Bier, 2007; and Siegel, 2012). Therefore, to practice
intellectual character education well, elementary and secondary educators must begin by creating
classroom environments marked by trust and respect. This requires showing genuine care and
concern for their students. Having this orientation toward one’s students, and doing what one can
to ensure that they manifest a similar orientation toward each other, goes a significant way
toward heading off many of the morally questionable behaviors and social dynamics that a
proponent of traditional character education might worry could be permitted where the focus in
on educating for intellectual virtues. In short, there are significant moral preconditions to the
successful practice of intellectual character education.

Conclusions

Personal character admits of at least four distinct (albeit partially overlapping)
dimensions and each dimension has a characteristic set of strengths or virtues. Moral, civic, and
intellectual virtues get their status as virtues at least partly on account of an underlying virtuous
or admirable motivation proper to the type of virtue in question. Performance virtues, by
contrast, are motivationally “open,” as it were, and gain their status as virtues on account of their usefulness within “performance-based” contexts.

This four-dimensional model of personal character has important implications for the practice of character education in elementary and secondary schools. Specifically, an approach to character education that focuses on the promotion and fostering of intellectual virtues is especially promising and surprisingly underexplored. While distinct from traditional character education, such an approach will retain a significant concern with students’ moral and civic development.
References


Ritchhart, Ron. 2015. *Creating Cultures of Thinking: The Eight Forces We Must Master to Truly Transform Our Schools* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass).


