

CONTINGENCY, PHRONESIS, AND CHARACTER EDUCATION: A RESTATEMENT OF THE VALUE OF A TRADITIONAL LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

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In a recent article in this journal, David A. Granger asks us to consider whether the assumptions underlying recent character education initiatives are really responsive to the problems that emerge in contemporary, pluralistic, democratic societies, and whether the serious problems that these initiatives purport to address are best understood from a character-based conception of morality.¹ Here, I want to focus on two of the major concerns that drive Granger to present these questions. First, he recognizes a serious and perhaps intractable conflict between the assumptions underlying the philosophical foundations of traditional character education and our pluralistic, democratic commitments to a range of reasonable, although incompatible, conceptions of the virtuous person or of the good. Second, he suggests that the inherent traditionalism of a character-based conception of morality is a dubious basis for addressing moral and social problems through education given what he takes to be serious moral and political failures of our past and present traditions. He writes, "In claiming the authority of tradition and moral sensibility of the past, one could argue, we implicitly promote a morality of compliance to the status quo".² He notes that any traditionalist character education program must presuppose a faith that, in our present 'enlightened' condition, we can recognize and avoid past errors and glean from our traditions only that which is *truly* valuable. But he asks, "Can this really be the case...in a country that leads the industrialized world in the percentage of children and elderly living in poverty, percentage of population without healthcare insurance, homelessness, unequal distribution of wealth, defense spending, foreign debt, deaths by execution, and so on?"³

For Granger then, the traditionalism inherent in character edu-

cation is problematic, first, because it is incompatible with what is good in contemporary society and current moral thinking (commitments to pluralism, diversity, and democracy), and second, because to value traditions as traditions is to ignore and to perpetuate what is rotten in human history. These two claims that Granger succinctly identifies are, I think, shared by both contemporary proponents and critics of character education alike, and, therefore, they have done much to shape the thinking about if and how we are to educate students in morality. Both claims, however, are mistaken. I shall begin with the former.

According to Granger's analysis, the common attraction of traditional character education follows from the presupposition of a conception of morality that is monistic, absolutistic, and universalistic. The thought is that if such a conception of morality were to be uniformly adopted, we could avoid many if not all of the conflicts and cases of immorality that plague society.

Granger's account of this attraction of character education draws on some anecdotal evidence supplied by his graduate foundations students' research. He writes, "...the students referred repeatedly, and with a sense of nostalgia, to the days before our (supposed) recent and steep moral and cultural decline, the days when everyone agreed upon and lived by the same basic values".⁴ He then adds, "It is quite obvious, I think, that my students are not alone in being attracted to the notion that a return to 'traditional' values will bring with it a safer and more cohesive society. On the surface at least, and couched in these terms, who would not be? The fashionable discourse of moral and cultural decline suggests that the very foundations of American life and schooling are eroding, and it urges that a recovery of the past is both possible and necessary. It calls us back to the future".⁵

As attractive as a return to so-called 'traditional' values may be, Granger claims that to act on that attraction would be to violate our fundamental pluralistic, democratic values. Given the monistic and

universalistic underpinnings of traditional character education, its effectiveness – its ability to fulfill its promises of lessening crime and immorality, and promoting meaningful and flourishing lives – could only be purchased at the sacrifice of that which seems to be at the center of our contemporary moral and political commitments.

Although I agree by and large with Granger’s analysis of the problems facing recent initiatives in character education, the real problem is that these initiatives have assumed, with Granger, that the philosophical justification for traditional character education initiatives commits us to the teaching and instilment of some fixed constellation of beliefs, principles, values, or virtues. The idea behind this conception of traditional character education is that, in order to meet the moral, social, and political demands of our changing society, schools must begin, or begin again, to teach students how to be more moral, and to teach students how to be moral, schools must teach students the correct (“traditional”) moral beliefs, principles, values, or virtues. The obvious problem, then, is, as Granger points out, that any selection of the “correct” set of beliefs, principles, values, or virtues would violate our fundamental commitments to pluralism, diversity, and democracy.

This problem can be avoided, however, if we reexamine the historical foundations for traditional character education and see it, as it is seen from the Aristotelian standpoint, as an attempt to develop a certain moral outlook or a certain *moral sensitivity*, and not (as it is commonly taken) as an attempt to develop an understanding of morality in terms of universality, impartiality, and ethical absolutism. What Granger uncovers is a conflict between our pluralistic commitments and one standard understanding of traditional character education. But this is not a conflict between our pluralistic commitments and the philosophical foundations of traditional character education as such. I will argue that a broadly Aristotelian perspective offers another, preferable approach to traditional character education that avoids the problematic monistic, absolutistic, and universalistic assumptions inherent in the standard thinking.

My aim then is to uncover the presuppositions in the current debate and to show that, if we “go back to the past” and reexamine the philosophical justification from a broadly Aristotelian perspective, the problems for contemporary character education that Granger rightly raises can largely be avoided. In short, my aim is to change the terms of the debate by recasting the philosophical foundations of character education in their traditional Aristotelian form. In the Aristotelian form, character education is, in part, a response to the fact of pluralism and therefore does not presuppose a monism about morality. Moreover, engaging in character education from this perspective engenders an appreciation for and understanding of the plurality of values and conceptions of the good life, and therefore such an account of character education should be embraced by those who share a deep commitment to pluralism and diversity. Therefore, by recasting the philosophical foundations of traditional character education, we can begin to develop new initiatives that are not in conflict with our commitments to pluralism, diversity, and democracy.

The approach to developing these initiatives that I shall sketch does advocate a return to traditional values which, I think, are increasingly being eroded. But it is not a return to the moral values of some idealized and mythologized past society where everyone agreed upon everything and all was milk and honey. The traditional values urged here are merely the traditional educational values of the liberal arts. As I hope to show, rethinking the philosophical foundations of character education offers us a relevant contemporary perspective from which the value of the liberal arts can be restated in terms of the moral, social, and political demands of our pluralistic and changing society, as well as in terms of our students’ own needs as they attempt to cope with those demands. Such a perspective is not friendly to the kinds of worries about the value of our traditions and our relations to them that Granger raises, but this, I shall argue, is an *advantage* of this perspective. Such worries have their place, but they cannot be properly addressed until we can recognize exactly what makes them worrisome, what we give up in addressing them,

and what resources we have to deal with them. This makes the perspective I shall present logically prior to the non-traditionalist view commonly adopted on both sides of the current debate.

The Primacy of Sophia in Moral Education

Aristotle was the first to distinguish between *sophia* and *phronesis* – between *theoretical* and *practical* wisdom.⁶ According to Aristotle, *sophia* concerns an understanding of the world that is universal and impartial. It is an understanding about *what there is*. It is the kind of understanding of the world that science purportedly aims at, or the kind of understanding that God would have, if God exists. Such an understanding, if achieved, results in an objective knowledge of how the world truly is, and, therefore, to achieve such an understanding we must adopt an impartial perspective. *Phronesis*, on the other hand, does not concern *what there is*, but *what to do*. It concerns *practice*, not *knowledge*. As such, it is not the universal and impartial understanding proper from a scientific point of view. “What should I do?” and “How should I live my life?”, according to the Aristotelian approach, are questions that can only be understood from the particular perspective of the individual asking the question. These are questions about *me*, and, therefore, cannot be understood, much less answered, from an impartial perspective that abstracts from the context those particular facts such as my interests, abilities, possibilities, limitations, obstacles, and history. To abstract such considerations from practical deliberation is to distort the nature of the actual problems at hand and to ignore the resources available for resolving them. Consequently, practical concerns (those that relate to action) require *phronesis*, and this requires more than the kind of impartial and objective understanding of the world appropriate in scientific investigation.

It is here that the Aristotelian approach diverges from the Platonic approach. For Plato, to know what kind of life to live, what to do, or what the virtues are, one needs only to understand what is *really* real, to understand the (capital “T”) Truth about the moral structure

behind the universe. If we only knew what is truly The Good, then, as Socrates tells us, we would never do evil and no harm could befall us. How, it must be asked, could someone who knew what was truly good do what is wrong, when, it must be admitted, everyone aims at doing the good? Or how could we be harmed if we understood that the goodness of our lives depends only on our attitude towards loss, and not the loss itself? Therefore, according to the Platonist, *sophia* is sufficient for the good life and for virtue, and, consequently, character education properly aims at understanding the moral Truth. Since an understanding of the moral Truth necessarily results in impartial and objective knowledge, that knowledge can be imparted to anyone with the intellectual capacity necessary for rational thought.

The primacy of *sophia* in moral education is, of course, not the privileged property of the Platonist. It is central tenant of the entire Rationalist approach to morality and education. According to Rationalism, whether or not we are virtuous depends only on whether or not we understand the Truth about the moral structure of the universe, the dictates of pure reason, the essential nature of human beings, or the commands of God. Since all normally functioning human beings have the capacity to reason, and reason is all that is required for *sophia*, then all normally functioning human beings have the capacity to comprehend the moral Truth and, consequently, to become virtuous and to achieve the good life. According to this view, then, character education ought to aim at imparting an understanding of the moral Truth (either through direct instruction by moral experts, as in the religious education model, or through cooperative, rational investigation by equals, as in Kohlberg's "Neo-Socratic" model).⁷ Through such education, virtue and happiness can be ensured for every normally functioning human being willing to internalize and live according to that knowledge. As Thomas Lickona, a leading advocate of contemporary character education, writes,

Good character is what we want for our children. Of what does it consist?...*Good character consists of knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good...*All three are

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necessary for leading a moral life; all three make up moral maturity. When we think about the kind of character we want for our children, it's clear that we want them to be able to judge what is right, care deeply about what is right, and then do what they believe to be right.⁸

As attractive as such a conception of character education may be to some, Granger points out that it is incompatible with our deeply held values of pluralism, diversity, and democracy. Pluralistic societies committed to diversity and democracy reject the claim that public matters such as educational policies can or should be based on the assertion or even assumption of some one conception of the moral Truth or the "The Good". This gives us a serious reason to reconsider an approach to character education that aims at instilling *any* particular set of moral beliefs, principles, values, or virtues in students. However, from this we need not conclude that the philosophical foundations of traditional character education are somehow fundamentally and necessarily in tension with our commitments to pluralism, diversity, and democracy. Rather, the underlying tension is between these contemporary moral convictions and an approach to character education that is based on the Rationalist's belief that a correct understanding of morality is or can be spelled out in some one particular set of moral beliefs, principles, etc.. Understood this way, Granger uncovers a serious problem for one mistaken approach to the foundation of character education. But since, as I will suggest, this approach to character education is indefensible, the real issue concerns a rethinking about the relationship between morality and education in general and not how we are to balance our concerns for character education against other, incompatible, moral and political commitments.

Contingency and The Rationalist Approach to Character Education

The extraordinary prevalence of the Rationalist's approach to character education is not mysterious. As Granger points out, there is a great hope and expectation that character education can and does

make a significant and effective difference in the lives of students. Since, according to the Rationalist's approach, a correct understanding of the Truth necessarily leads to virtue and happiness for anyone capable of and willing to acquire it, there does seem to follow an imperative to provide just this sort of education, and a justified expectation that doing so will make things better for everyone.

In addition to what a Rationalist program of character education promises, its attraction can also be located in the fact that it resonates with some of the deepest assumptions made in contemporary moral thinking. Most important among these is the claim that one's virtue and, consequently, one's happiness, is a matter that is, or can be made to be, completely under one's own control. This intuition is what drives the Socratic view discussed above. It is also captured in Kant's famous claim that "It is impossible to conceive of anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a *good will*...a good will seems to constitute the indispensable condition of our very worthiness to be happy".⁹ However, it is this intuition that needs to be excised from our moral point of view, and, by doing so, the true nature and significance of the foundations of character education can be seen more clearly.

One of the most serious problems for the Rationalists' approach to moral education is related to a problem introduced by Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel under the term "moral luck".¹⁰ Williams and Nagel differ significantly on the formulation of the problem, but the underlying idea for them both is this: Human life is permeated by contingency. There is nothing over which we exercise full control, and, consequently, there is no one pattern of behavior, no one code of rules, laws, or principles, no one overarching moral Truth such that things will go well for us insofar as we live in accordance with it. Given the prevalence of contingency in human life, no aspect of our lives can be made immune from luck, and, therefore, even our best moral efforts can be undermined by forces beyond our control.

Although this seems to be a trivially true and obvious comment on the human condition, its implications for moral thinking are serious. If we accept that even our best efforts can be undone by contingency, then we must give up the belief, central to the Rationalist approach, that an impartial, objective understanding of the Truth is sufficient to ensure virtue and happiness. Therefore, we are left with little reason to believe that *sophia* ought to be the aim of character education properly conceived. Since human beings are necessarily subject to contingency, if the aim of character education to promote virtue and happiness is possible, then the moral understanding that is engendered by character education should not reflect the universal, objective, and impartial understanding achieved when we attain *sophia*. Since human life is necessarily permeated by contingency, the nature of practical problems, as well as the range of possible reasonable resolutions, will vary with the contingent circumstances that give rise to them.

It follows then that the kind of moral understanding aimed at in character education is neither impartial nor objective so it cannot be acquired solely by the exercise of reason itself, nor can it be formulated and codified in a manner appropriate for transmission to or adoption by any and all rational agents. Consequently, the aims of character education cannot be satisfied through the teaching of any particular set of beliefs, principles, values or virtues.¹¹

Phronesis and The Aristotelian Approach to Morality and Character Education

The Aristotelian approach to morality rejects *sophia* as primary, and thus, it rejects the claim that character education aims at instilling any particular set of beliefs, values, etc.. Instead, it takes *phronesis* to be the primary goal of character education, and it interprets *phronesis* as a sort of moral outlook, a kind of *moral sensitivity* to the facts about the world. By reexamining the Aristotelian foundation for character education, we can therefore make clear a better understanding of the nature of morality and the role that education

plays in it than that which is commonly offered by those Rationalists who appeal to Aristotle as their philosophical benefactor, but then formulate initiatives for character education that embrace their own particular favored constellation of values.

For Aristotle, morality concerns what we should do, and since what we should do depends on the various contingent features that surround our lives as they are lived, proper moral understanding concerns how we interpret, react to, and cope with those contingencies. Aristotle's approach for dealing with contingency is summarized in his "Doctrine of the Mean".¹² Briefly, according to the Doctrine of the Mean, a virtuous action is an action that lies between two vices – a vice of deficiency and a vice of excess. Take bravery, for instance. If one exhibits bravery, then one properly recognizes the relevant particular features of a situation and correctly assesses the amount of fear that is called for in that situation. If one shows the appropriate amount of fear, then one is properly considered to have acted bravely. If one shows too much fear, then the agent exhibits cowardice. Similarly, to show too little fear is to be foolhardy. To have the virtue of bravery, therefore, is to have the sort of character that habitually and predictably makes the right kinds of judgments and acts appropriately given the particular features of the situation where fear is the salient emotion.

According to the Doctrine of the Mean account of virtue, then, a virtuous character cannot be developed through a theoretical investigation of the moral structure of the cosmos, the dictates of pure reason, the essential nature of human beings, or the commands of God. To be virtuous is just *to respond to the particular features of a situation the way that a virtuous person does*. Granger calls this a "distinctively circular" definition because the determination of virtue therefore appeals to the "authority of tradition".¹³ To determine what a virtue is, on Granger's interpretation of Aristotle, one must appeal to the "interests, values, and beliefs of those whose interest it was to maintain the general status quo of that [Athenian] rigidly classed

society...virtue [is] essentially defined by the people and behaviors that [are] said on the authority of these same people to display the virtue".¹⁴ Therefore, according to Granger, character education, even for Aristotle, is inexorably tied to some socially privileged constellation of virtues and values, and, consequently, incompatible with our commitments to pluralism, diversity, and democracy. But this criticism fails to appreciate the significance of *phronesis* in the Aristotelian approach, and therefore it betrays the deep Rationalist assumptions existing in the current debate about traditional character education, even on the part of its critics.

According to the Aristotelian approach, since virtue concerns our habitual and predictable responses to contingency, and since human life is permeated by contingency, what *makes* some particular act or character virtuous cannot be explicated or codified in terms of any prior set of moral beliefs, rules, laws, principles, or values. What counts as the appropriate response can only be determined on a case-by-case basis. Consequently, the *identification* of virtues cannot be made without reference to the sort of perspective from which the right judgments are made. Therefore, unless we are brought up within the appropriate traditions, we cannot identify suitable models for virtuous activity. Aristotle is not saying, however, that bravery is a virtue because he or the Greeks value bravery. He is, instead, saying bravery is a virtue because it is the appropriate response to the particular features of a situation with respect to fear. But since we cannot codify what would count as "the appropriate response", the most that we can say is that to acquire this virtue is to adopt the perspective of those who already exhibit it. Identifying this perspective, of course, requires an appeal to tradition, but that appeal is not the justification for the value of bravery. The value of bravery follows from the fact that brave people will less often find their projects and efforts thwarted, since they neither run from shadows nor chase after windmills.

Phronesis, then, requires the kind of perspective that the virtuous person has, and to be virtuous is to have *phronesis*. Grammatical

appearances aside, this statement is not circular. What gives it its circular appearance is the assumption that impartial, objective moral knowledge is necessary for virtue and, consequently, the knowledge necessary to judge and respond to particular facts appropriately will be the same for all persons. If *phronesis* were a kind of impartial and objective knowledge, then this statement would be circular and the Aristotelian approach to character education would offer the objectionable sort of authoritarianism and traditionalism for which Granger, and many others, have chastised it. However, since the understanding that a virtuous person has is not *knowledge* of facts, but more properly considered, a kind of *sensitivity* to the facts, it is quite appropriate to point to virtuous persons as exemplars of this sensitivity in the attempt to develop this sensitivity in our students.¹⁵ But to do so obviously is not to indoctrinate them with the moral *beliefs* that virtuous exemplars hold or have held since *phronesis* is not a kind of knowledge. To hold up virtuous persons as exemplars is to use them as examples of how to respond appropriately to *particular* situations. By examining how virtuous agents themselves understand and react to their own situations, we can begin to gain a situated understanding of the exemplars' own reasons for acting and the exemplars' *own* appreciation of those reasons. It is this *understanding* of the agents' own reasons and appreciation of those reasons that we should aim at in developing *phronesis*, not the agents' reasons and their appreciation of those reasons *themselves*.

At this point in the process, there is still the threat that the selection of exemplars will privilege one particular constellation of values above another, thereby resulting in authoritarianism or blind traditionalism. However, character education need not nor should not cease at this point. Developing the kind of sensitivity embodied by *phronesis* requires that we understand that the exemplars are *different* people and live or lived in contingent contexts which *are not our own* and who acted for reasons which were *their own*. Members in each tradition will hold up their own exemplars because, if they were in the situations faced by these exemplars, they would hope to respond in similar ways. Of course, different traditions will hold

up different individuals and character traits as exemplars, but this is no problem for the Aristotelian approach. What *phronesis* gives us is the ability to see how the particular facts of a situation hold together as a whole, and therefore, seeing how different traditions give shape to the particular facts is an important part of attaining this sort of sensitivity. It broadens our appreciation of the breadth and depth of the possibilities available to reasonable human beings. A robust initiative in character education will therefore recognize the plurality of traditions and perspectives, and attempt to engender in the students a situated understanding of exemplary cases from as many and as diverse traditions and perspectives possible. There is no need to restrict a character education program to any one particular tradition or constellation of values since acquiring *phronesis* is not to acquire the beliefs of any particular tradition or any particular set of values. Furthermore, since acquiring *phronesis* is to acquire the ability to see how the particular facts hang together for virtuous persons, it would be an anemic character education program that selects only one interpretation of the virtuous person and one that does a disservice to the process of developing this sensitivity.

By recognizing that an Aristotelian initiative in character education would embrace a diverse and pluralistic conception of the virtuous person, we avoid the problem of traditionalism and authoritarianism. However, we run the risk on the other side of the spectrum of promoting a kind of relativism by failing to distinguish the appropriate exemplars from the inappropriate ones. But this too is only a serious threat if character education is thought of in Rationalist terms. As already mentioned, acquiring *phronesis* requires us to gain an understanding of the traditions of others and how they interpret the significance of the facts of the world. Understanding why others have made the choices they have, value the things they do, and pursue the kinds of lives they favor helps us to better see the breadth and depth of possibilities for and limitations to human pursuits. This makes possible rational criticism of both our own traditions and the traditions of others by presenting, in their complexity, a plurality of perspectives from which to reflect on the

reasonableness of any one perspective. Armed with a diverse range of interpretations of the world, we are better able to recognize the strengths *and* weaknesses of each.

By gaining this sort of situated understanding of the lives and actions of others, the Aristotelian approach to character education therefore actually reinforces the values of pluralism and diversity and lays bare the rich possibilities that human lives are claimed to have by pluralists. It is not a surrender to authoritarianism or blind traditionalism because it does not require that we select any one tradition or perspective as the correct or privileged one. Rather, it prescribes an attempt to understand as many and as diverse interpretations of the world as practically possible. It does not collapse into relativism because it does not require us to accept every tradition, perspective, or interpretation as equally valuable. Once we see why different individuals or traditions assign significance to the facts in the way they do, we can begin to discuss whether, *in their situation*, they do so reasonably, as well as whether their actions, judgments, or interpretations could be reasonable in *our* context. Such discussions clear the way for reflection on the plurality of reasonable values and conceptions of the good life, thereby illuminating both the richness of possibilities available to human beings, as well as the pitfalls and misinterpretations that frustrate and destroy good lives.

By recognizing the priority of *phronesis* over *sophia* in character education, the Aristotelian approach to character education therefore necessarily *embraces* pluralism and diversity, and it rejects monistic authoritarianism and cultural relativism. By recognizing that a cultivated and mature moral character aims at a kind of sensitivity to particular facts rather than at an impartial and universal understanding that produces the same judgments in all people regardless of their particular contexts, situations, or histories, the Aristotelian approach to character education avoids the problem of reconciling our commitments to plurality and democracy with the aims of character education. The main concern of character education is, of course, first with the kind of people that we are

raising – with, to state the obvious, *character*. The mistake, then, is to assume that character education necessarily aims to satisfy this concern by instilling particular moral beliefs of any kind in students. The fact of the matter is, given the prevalence of contingency, there exists a plurality of reasonable beliefs, principles, values, virtues, and forms of life. Moreover, the prevalence of contingency in human life ensures that no one set of these beliefs, principles, values or virtues, nor any one form of life, can be either necessary or sufficient to guarantee a moral and flourishing life for anyone who might adopt it. It follows that character education cannot hope to achieve its ends by ignoring character and focusing instead on instilling any one set of moral beliefs.

Manners, Not Knowledge – The Traditional Value of the Liberal Arts Education Restated

I have thus far set out what seems to me to be the appropriate philosophical foundation for constructing initiatives in character education. The goal of character education ought to be the development of *phronesis*, and this is understood as a sort of perspective or sensitivity to the facts that fosters an appropriate response to contingent particular situations. Since human lives are permeated by contingency, character education should eschew attempts to instill particular beliefs, principles, values, or virtues meant to serve as the major premise in any and all moral deliberations. This much should sit well with the pluralistic, democratic commitments that are often seen as in tension with character education in general.

By way of conclusion, I want to sketch how we might pursue a broadly Aristotelian initiative in character education. I cannot here go into the details of such an initiative, but the account can be brief and perhaps somewhat polemical since, I take it, the structure of such an initiative will no doubt be a familiar program.

The first question to ask is whether schools *can* help to develop *phronesis* in students. Surely schools cannot be wholly responsible

for this task. However, given what has been said so far, one might be lead to believe, with Rousseau, that common schools could not play *any* role in this. *Phronesis* is, of course, a perspective, a kind of sensitivity to the facts of the world and, as such, cannot be taught the way one can teach the rules of grammar or the principles of physics. Since it cannot be codified, it is not the sort of thing that can be learned from a book or in a correspondence course and would therefore seem more at home in a tutorial program tailored to the individual student than in a common classroom with a set and predetermined curriculum.

Nevertheless, there is an important role that schools can play in the development of *phronesis*. By immersing students in literature, the languages, the arts, history, and philosophy, and teaching students to see the value of the claims of each within its own context, as well as to assess those claims within and across contexts, schools can begin to initiate students into the conversation that makes up the total collective experience of human beings, and by initiating them into this conversation, provide them with the character necessary for successful participation in it.

Following Michael Oakeshott, I use the metaphor of a conversation to distance myself from the Rationalists' conception of the collective experience of human beings and the related conception of education.¹⁶ For Rationalists, the traditions that make up the history of human experience are seen as something detached from ourselves and presented in order to be evaluated by reason and to be judged by the standards of the argument. Traditions are seen as dangerous by Rationalism because they are the vessels of past mistakes and ignorance, the result of previous oppression and coercion, and are infected with corruption and prejudice. Therefore, traditions are only to be accepted and engaged in on the condition that they can defend their truth and their value to each individual through rational demonstration.

On this understanding, the traditions that make up the total

collective human experience are not the kind of things that can be entered into the way one enters a conversation. In a conversation, the goal is not truth, demonstration and justification are not demanded, analysis is not required, and the benefits of engagement are not measured by what is produced apart from the participation itself (although all of these features may have their place *within* the conversation). In conversation, the only *goal* is to participate, and when participation is serious, the primary benefit needs to be no more than an understanding of each of the plurality of voices conversing. One need not have any particular objective to enter into a conversation. There are no particular skills and no prerequisite knowledge required for conversation. Participation requires only that one adopt the appropriate *manners* for conversing. That is to say, in a conversation, no one voice can claim to have a superior understanding of the entirety of the human condition. No one voice can claim to have the complete and correct account of all experience. Each can only express its own understanding from the point of view of its own contingent perspective and try to make its own understanding accessible to others. When such manners are developed, the conversation flourishes, each voice is heard, each has its say, and, when the participants return to their own lives, they can better appreciate the richness of human possibility and ingenuity. What we take from a conversation is not *truth* but *understanding*, and this understanding can both enrich our lives with new possibilities and provide for a better appreciation of what we already hold dear. It is not until *after* this kind of appreciation is achieved that we can reasonably assess the degree to which we ought to change our lives or our world, what would be lost in doing so, and what possibilities for change are truly available to us.

Developing the manners to engage in the human experience as a conversation is, I take it, the primary value of a liberal arts education, and through such an education, students develop the sort of character most susceptible to *phronesis*. Such a character eagerly recognizes other perspectives and interpretations, and it attempts

to appreciate them in their own terms and to subject them to the scrutiny of other perspectives and interpretations. It accepts the plurality of human pursuits and strives to understand the internal coherence of as many and as diverse pursuits as possible. It is a character that is willing and able to subject its own understanding to the tests of others, but one not ready to trade or abandon its own perspective easily because it also is alive to what is good in what it already has. In short, it is a character that expresses the manners of conversation because it understands itself as a participant in the collective human experience and not merely as an outsider unwilling to participate before human experience learns to behave and disciplines itself by the standards of impartiality, objective truth, and rational demonstration.

As such, the primary value of the liberal arts education cannot be seen from the Rationalists' perspective. The Rationalist cannot make sense of an education that does not aim at understanding, understanding that does not result in knowledge, and knowledge that is not of the Truth. But a traditional liberal arts education aims only to initiate the student to the conversation that is the human experience, and by doing so, to develop in the student the appropriate manners to participate in it. It does not, or should not, aim to prepare students for successful interaction in the world merely by arming them with the right theorems, principles, and facts about the world, since these are insufficient as guides in particular situations. Developing marketable skills is, no doubt, an important goal for education, but on this point, the liberal arts can hardly compete with science, tech, trade, and vocational programs. Therefore, the primary goal of a liberal arts education should not be to present a broad base of skills and knowledge upon which specialization in some one yet-to-be-determined field can be developed. The student who asks of liberal arts education "when will I ever *use* this" is likely to miss out on what is most important in that education, and the school that presents its liberal arts program as a "broad based education" would do everyone a service by stating clearly that, in truth, it is offering

only pre-vocational training. The value of the liberal arts is not primarily in the knowledge or technical skills that one acquires from their study, but rather in the sort of person one becomes by studying them. Since the situated understanding and disposition required for *phronesis* is precisely that which is offered by a liberal arts education, the traditional liberal arts program serves as the best model for initiatives in character education properly conceived. William Cory summed up this character-based conception of the value of a traditional liberal arts education when he wrote,

[At school] you are not engaged so much in acquiring knowledge as in making mental efforts under criticism...A certain amount of knowledge you can indeed with average faculties acquire so as to retain; nor need you regret the hours you spend on much that is forgotten, for the shadow of lost knowledge at least protects you from many illusions. But you go to a great school not so much for knowledge as for arts and habits; for the habit of attention, for the art of expression, for the art of assuming at a moment's notice, a new intellectual position, for the art of entering quickly into another person's thoughts, for the habit of submitting to censure and refutation, for the art of indicating assent or dissent in graduated terms, for the habit of regarding minute points of accuracy, for the art of working out what is possible in a given time, for taste, discrimination, for mental courage and mental soberness. And above all you go to a great school for self-knowledge.¹⁷

This, I believe, is the value of a liberal arts education. Its value is located in the character it develops, not the facts or skills that it transmits. This value cannot be seen from a perspective that demands up front an external justification and a practical payoff for any and all engagements and efforts it considers. Nevertheless, given the importance of *phronesis* in an increasingly complicated and pluralistic world, even those who demand such justifications

and payoffs should still find much to value in a reinvigoration of the traditional value of the liberal arts.

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ENDNOTES

1. David A. Granger, "Back to the Future: Coming to Terms with the Claims of History and Expediency in Recent Character Education Initiatives," *Educational Change* (Spring 2001-2002).
2. *Ibid.*, 50.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, 47.
5. *Ibid.*, 48. Granger is correct in being skeptical of the romanticized picture of the past underlying the common attraction to character education, but he apparently accepts the identification of what he calls "traditional" values with what are rightly called "absolutist" values. This is an unfortunately prevalent confusion and some progress should be made if we reject it at the outset.
6. See *Metaphysics* 993b 20-21. Also, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103b26-1104a9.
7. See Lawrence Kohlberg, "High School Democracy and Educating for a Just Society", *Moral Education*, Ralph L. Mosher ed. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1980).
8. Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 50—51 [original emphasis]. Lickona's justification for character education programs here commits an equivocation symptomatic of the Rationalists approach. He moves without interruption from the fact that we want our children "to be able to judge what is right" to the fact that "*good character requires knowing the good*". This Rationalistic assumption is, as I shall argue, both incompatible with pluralism and untenable given the fact of contingency.
9. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, H.J. Paton, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 61. Elsewhere, Kant explains that, in conjunction with God's goodness, being worthy of happiness is sufficient for *achieving* true happiness, and so while the attainment of happiness is not possible for limited beings alone, since moral agents must postulate the existence of an all good God who will

reward us according to our merit, Kant is squarely in the Rationalist tradition of assuming that whether or not we attain happiness is entirely within our own *control* if not our own *power*. See, for example, Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Lewis White Beck, trans. (Englewood Cliffs: Macmillan, 1993), 134—35.

10. See Bernard Williams, “Moral Luck”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol. 50 (1976); 115—35, and Thomas Nagel, “Moral Luck”, in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
11. For a related discussion of the Rationalist approach to character education and some of its problems, see Paul Hirst, “The Demands of Moral Education”, *Education in Morality*, J. Mark Halstead and Terence H. McLaughlin, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1999).
12. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk II ch 6-9.
13. Granger, 42.
14. *Ibid.*
15. It is important to note that Aristotle denies that *phronesis* is identical to *understanding*. Instead, he identifies *phronesis* as a kind of wisdom. What differentiates *phronesis* and understanding is that the former results in action while the latter results in judgment. As such, acquiring this kind of understanding is important for, but not identical to, acquiring *phronesis*. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Bk. 6, chap. 10.
16. This discussion owes much to the general thought of Michael Oakeshott and particularly to his “Rationalism in Politics”, “The Study of ‘Politics’ in a University”, and “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind”, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991). Two differences between Oakeshott’s position and the one described here deserve comment. First, Oakeshott holds that the metaphor of a conversation is the “appropriate image of human conduct” (Voice of Poetry, 490). My claim here is much more narrow. I hold only that it is the appropriate image *for thinking about education*. Whether or not this image is appropriate for thinking about all human conduct and in all discourse is a matter beyond my present concern. More importantly, Oakeshott believes that the sort of education program suggested here is only appropriate and possible at the university level. While I am certainly concerned with

the direction that colleges and universities are moving in, I see no reason to limit the discussion to higher education. Unlike Oakeshott, my concern here is with the ability of a formal education to foster the sort of character most susceptible to *phronesis*, and not with achieving *phronesis* solely through that education (surely an impossible goal). Therefore, I see no reason why schools cannot make the *process* of achieving *phronesis* a goal, nor why the initiation into the conversation cannot begin much earlier in the process of acquiring the ability to converse than Oakeshott maintains.

17. Quoted in Oakeshott, "The Voice of Poetry", 491-92.