

SUMMER RESEARCH 2024/25

PROJECT ABSTRACT



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

PROJECT # 4

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| SUPERVISOR/S: | Associate Professor Liezl van Zyl |
| PROJECT TITLE: | Improving character: The feasibility of a non-deliberate strategy of virtue acquisition |
| FIELD: | Philosophy - Virtue theory and Moral Psychology |
| DIVISION/SCHOOL: | ALPSS - Law, Politics and Philosophy |
| PROJECT LOCATION: | Hamilton |

PROJECT ABSTRACT:

Aristotle – the well-known ancient Greek philosopher – claimed that character plays an important role in human life. Whether we are able to live a good or happy life depends on whether we have virtuous character traits such as courage, temperance, honesty, justice, and prudence. Children learn to become virtuous by imitating virtuous role models – parents, teachers, community leaders, and so on – eventually gaining the experience needed to become truly virtuous and wise.

Aristotle's thoughts have had an enormous influence on contemporary approaches to character development. For example, the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (University of Birmingham, UK), a world-leading research centre focusing on character, virtue, and flourishing, uses an Aristotelian model of virtue to develop pedagogical approaches for character education in schools. Philosopher Kristjan Kristjánsson (2015) argues that Aristotelian character education can undo the effects of "bad upbringing" to bring about "radical self-change" - despite Aristotle's own skepticism in this regard.

Recent interdisciplinary work in philosophy, psychology and education has developed and promoted various strategies for character education. The most prominent of these is the Oxford Character Project, which offers a set of seven "practical strategies that can aid educators who want to cultivate virtue in their students" (Lamb et al. 2022) What these strategies have in common is that the teacher or educator requires the learner to engage in activities with the deliberate aim of improving the learner's character. These activities include, for example, studying and imitating the behaviours of virtuous role models, reflecting on personal experience, engaging in dialogue with other learners, and using technology as prompts or reminders to exercise a particular virtue (See e.g. Lamb et.al. 2022). Our attempts to improve ourselves so as to master some rewarding activity are more effective as a moral education than any formal ethics course could be

The aim of the summer research project is to examine a hypothesis, namely that a more feasible "strategy" for character improvement is to engage in meaningful social activities, such as sport, arts and crafts, volunteer work, etc., that are not led by an educator and not aimed specifically at character improvement. Although the hypothesis appears to be paradoxical, in that it suggests that deliberately setting out to achieve a certain end can prevent one from actually achieving that end, it is consistent with the Aristotelian view that the human good or happiness consists of virtuous activity that is aimed at goods that are internal to practices. On Alasdair MacIntyre's view, our attempts to master some rewarding activity are more effective than formal moral education in bringing about character improvement (MacIntyre 1981, 2015).

The summer research project forms part of a larger project on the need for, possibility of, and strategies for character improvement, and the scholar will have the opportunity to work alongside the supervisor to conduct a guided literature review on recent theoretical and empirical research on character development, with the aim of developing a sound argument for or against the hypothesis about non-deliberate character improvement .

Depending on the interests and academic background of the scholar we may choose to focus on a specific group or community, such as university students, youth offenders, parents or foster parents, and members of specific professions (e.g. law, health care, etc.).

References

- Brant, J., Brooks, E., & Lamb, M. 2022. *Cultivating Virtue in the University*. OUP.
- Kristjánsson, K. 2015. *Aristotelian Character Education*. Routledge.
- MacIntyre, A. 1981. *After Virtue*. University of Notre Dame Press.
- MacIntyre, A. 2015. The Irrelevance of Ethics. In A. Bielskis & K. Knight (eds.), *Virtue and Economy: Essays on Morality and Markets*. Ashgate.

STUDENT SKILLS:

- Excellent English language skills - the ability to write clearly and precisely, avoiding unnecessary jargon, and structuring ideas and arguments in a coherent manner.
- Previous study in Philosophy or Ethics (essential). Familiarity with virtue ethics and/or virtue theory will be very useful.
- Excellent research skills (finding relevant literature, providing accurate summaries, meticulous referencing).
- The ability to work independently, to think critically and creatively.
- The ability to work to a deadline.

PROJECT TASKS:

1. LITERATURE REVIEW 1: The summer scholar will conduct a review of recent, empirically informed literature on Aristotelian virtue theory with the aim of identifying key claims about the nature of virtue and the possibility of character improvement.
2. LITERATURE REVIEW 2: The summer scholar will review recent literature on strategies for character improvement.
3. ARTICLE: The summer scholar will co-author a journal article on the feasibility of a non-deliberate "strategy" for character improvement.
4. POSTER: The summer scholar will report their findings in the form of a poster.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES:

- Student's Research Poster (as per clause 6 of the [Scholarship regulations](#))
- A co-authored journal article on non-deliberate character improvement. Possible venues include The Journal of Value Inquiry, or a student Philosophy journal such as Dialogue: A Journal of Religion and Philosophy, The Dualist, Episteme, and Aletheia.
- The summer scholar will gain experience in completing interdisciplinary research in applied philosophy and moral psychology.