

SEEKING εὐδαιμονία EUDAIMONIA

How do we develop good character?
Philosophers and social scientists are teaming
up—and turning to Aristotle for guidance.

By Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

AT A TIME WHEN THE PHRASE “ANCIENT history” is a common pejorative, you’d be forgiven if you didn’t know that we are living in an age of Aristotle.

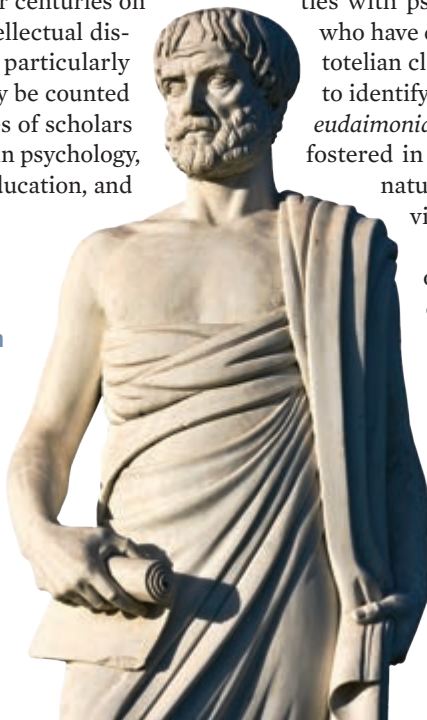
But interest in the Athenian sage, who lived and worked more than two millennia ago, has been an identifiable and enduring feature of the intellectual landscape of multiple disciplines for at least the last three decades. After centuries on the sidelines of secular intellectual discourse, Aristotelian ideas, particularly about ethics, can reasonably be counted as among the key influences of scholars not only in philosophy, but in psychology, development economics, education, and the law.

NEO-ARISTOTELIAN: Curren says the revival of interest in Aristotle in the past several years is “remarkable,” and well suited to addressing many of the problems of our age.

“It’s remarkable,” says Randall Curren, chair of Rochester’s philosophy department.

A scholar of Aristotelian ethics, Curren has crossed disciplines through much of his career. Although his primary appointment is in the School of Arts & Sciences, he’s had a joint appointment at the Warner School of Education since his arrival at Rochester in 1988. Since then he’s forged ties with psychologists studying well-being, who have carried out empirical tests of Aristotelian claims. He’s worked with educators to identify ways in which Aristotle’s ideal of *eudaimonia* or “human flourishing” might be fostered in schools. He’s joined forces with natural scientists concerned with environmental sustainability.

And although he hasn’t developed any formal ties with economists, he’s heartened by the influence of Aristotelian ethics in development economics. Capability theory, a new paradigm of human well-being developed in the 1980s by Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen





and University of Chicago philosopher and law professor Martha Nussbaum, is associated with a new United Nations metric for international development efforts that takes into account non-monetary indicators. “Capability theory is self-consciously Aristotelian,” says Curren. “When people like Amartya Sen start adopting these ideas, it really is the age of Aristotle in some very interesting ways. There’s no doubt about it. Aristotle’s got legs.”

The focus of Aristotle’s theory of ethics was the nature of a good life, the role of virtues in living a good life, and how civic institutions might be designed to enable human beings to work toward that ideal. *Eudaimonia* was the Greek term for living well—or living a flourishing life, as it’s been translated in English—and its essence was fulfilling one’s human potential well.

Fulfilling one’s potential well required virtue—at least two kinds of virtue, in fact. There were intellectual virtues, such as the capacity for knowledge and reason, and there were moral virtues such as courage, honesty, and self-restraint, among others.

Aristotle argued that moral virtues, like any virtues, were obtained through guided practice. And a further, and arguably most challenging aspect of Aristotle’s ethics, was that in order for individuals to develop moral virtues, civic institutions, including schools, had to be designed to foster their practice. Individuals didn’t develop moral virtues on their own, but rather, through social interaction. Therefore, developing moral virtues was a civic enterprise.

At first glance, this might all sound rather high-minded. But Curren’s expertise in Aristotelian ethics has been in wide demand, and far outside the confines of academic conferences.

CURREN HAS BECOME A KEY FIGURE IN THE ARISTOTELIAN revival for his work on character education. Character education—some of it Aristotelian, some not—gained traction in the United States in the 1990s. President Bill Clinton sponsored a series of White House conferences on the subject that brought together educators, researchers, and leading proponents of character education. Curren, a delegate to two of those conferences, consulted widely in the Rochester area in the mid-1990s as multiple area school districts began to craft character education programs.

In the last year, he’s taken on his biggest role in character education yet—in the United Kingdom. In November 2012, Kristján Kristjánsson, a leading scholar in Aristotelian ethics now at the University of Birmingham, asked Curren to take the position of chair of moral and virtue education at a new research center housed in Birmingham’s education school: the Jubilee Centre for Character and Values.

A so-called “fractional appointment,” it was designed to be compatible with his full-time role at Rochester. It would also be a joint appointment with the Royal Institute of Philosophy, an institution founded in the 1920s by Bertrand Russell with the intention of bringing the best work in philosophy before the public.

In his role at the Jubilee Centre, which began in May 2013, Curren offers intellectual leadership, through contributions to proposals, speaking engagements, and consultation with a group of resident scholars in disciplines such as psychology, education, and the law. Their work involves researching successful models for character education, and exploring how ethical values inform decision making in a variety of the professions.

Curren was formally inaugurated in his professorship at the Royal Institute of Philosophy, the first in its history, in January. A



conference based on his work culminated in his keynote, “Meaning, Motivation, and the Good.” In the fall, he’ll lecture across Britain.

The Jubilee Centre emerged at a fraught time, in the aftermath of a spate of rioting in August 2011. The riots began in an impoverished neighborhood in London, after a police officer shot and killed a 29-year-old man, father to four children. Rioting spread throughout London, and to other cities, including Birmingham. It generated national soul searching, followed by the appointment of a commission, a study, and a final report with recommendations.

The commission noted Britain’s high levels of unemployment, feelings of hopelessness among many youths, and called for multiple improvements in the delivery of social services. But the report also noted the “strong potential” of educational programs “designed to help children build resilience and self-confidence as part of normal school life.” These “character education” programs, commissioners concluded, should be further studied and expanded nationally.

Curren concedes that character education can appeal to those concerned about rising levels of “hooliganism.” But the primary funder of the Jubilee Centre, the John Templeton Foundation, has been pouring resources into research in psychology and philosophy that has pointed toward more complex, less direct, and less



immediate solutions to social upheaval than the critics of Britain's young ruffians might imagine.

With Kristjánsson as its deputy director, the center would have an Aristotelian bent from the start. And for the research chair in moral and virtue education, the center looked for someone with a similar orientation.

"We were looking for someone who was at once an established figure in mainstream philosophy and a big name in philosophy of education," says Kristjánsson. "We also wanted someone with a naturalistic, broadly virtue ethical approach to character education."

"I'm completely on board with the mission of the Jubilee Centre," says Curren. "But I don't come to it assuming it's a simple matter of people being unethical, and that there would never be riots again if there were adequate character education in the schools. That would be a very un-Aristotelian point of view."

The phrases "character education," and even more so, "moral education," can be off-putting to some, Curren notes. "It can sound heavy-handed and didactic. People who are understandably

skittish about moral education, who worry that it's going to be indoctrinating—they have an image of it as a heavy-handed thing."

But in his work with schools, Curren has seen the controversy dissipate when stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and administrators get together to define and list values and virtues. "It's

about common morality," he says. "When you have public processes to define those lists, there's a lot of convergence, across the political spectrum, among people with very different experiences. They converge on short lists of traits that are just, without controversy, traits that everybody wants their kids to have. And everybody at least intuitively understands that their lives are not going to go very well if they don't have these traits."

From the Jubilee Centre, researchers have fanned across Britain, interviewing teachers and students at a wide range of schools. They've asked about character education programs currently in place, attempting to find out from teachers what they believe their role should be; and from students how various aspects of their education might help or hinder their attempts not only to develop various virtues, but also to define them in the

OFFICE HOURS: Chair of the philosophy department in Arts & Sciences and a faculty member at the Warner School, Curren meets with Warner master's student Jenna Tomaselo and philosophy doctoral student James Otis.



first place. The aim? To improve character education in the interest of the “flourishing pupil.”

A genuinely Aristotelian character education assumes that a particular virtue, like any skill, can be learned through practice. Practice begins by offering students a basic vocabulary—often a list of virtues they define through discussion—that reflect traits they admire, that they’d want their friends to have, that they’d like to have themselves. From there, it’s a matter of dialogue to determine how to interpret and apply virtues in various real-life situations.

“Many of us who come out of Aristotelian ethics use analogies like learning to play a musical instrument,” Curren says. “Initially,

ACROSS THE POND: In London last January, Curren addressed the Royal Institute of Philosophy, as the 89-year-old institute’s first honorary professor. He’ll lecture throughout Britain this fall.

you practice with a lot of guidance. But the goal, in developing virtues of character as in musicianship, is for the student to learn to guide her own practice.”

That involves developing a vocabulary as to what constitutes good playing, as well as learning to carry out multiple tasks at once. There’s producing the sound, but also listening, and then responding to what you hear, as you play. “You need to listen for the right things,” says Curren, “and to want to get better.”

Curren discovered philosophy at a young age. He says he was attracted to logical systems and explanations. He spent his lunch money on philosophy books. It was a respite from everyday life, but life, its messiest and darkest aspects, were ever present for Curren. The life of the mind is often considered a luxury, but Curren may be a case in point that people can pursue a life of the mind under difficult circumstances. When Curren was eight, his mother committed suicide, leaving him and two brothers in the care of his father, who, like his mother, suffered from mental illness. “Having been taught little by my parents and left to ripen in Rousseau’s garden as I might, I had also enjoyed more than a little freedom to explore, invent, and pursue my interests as I pleased,” he writes in a forthcoming autobiographical essay. Libraries and bookstores, he found, were “well-ordered spaces to make my own.”

He devoured works by Bertrand Russell, David Hume, and many others. He also began reading works in psychology, starting with R. D. Laing’s *Sanity, Madness, and the Family*. He took out a subscription to *Psychology Today*.

By the end of high school, he’d developed his lifelong interest in the philosophy of education—as well as his signature tendency to seek practical applications of philosophical ideas. In an underground newspaper he founded with friends, he penned a critique of his school’s testing practices based on the ideas of the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, who posited three stages of learning, in which mastery of details was only one stage—the second—between inspiration and achievement of real understanding. Sales of the paper were “for-

bidden yet brisk,” Curren writes, and as it turned out, his math teacher responded by offering him the chance to design and teach the course’s unit on the slide rule, and to design and grade the unit exam.

distinguished for work in the philosophy of science. He pursued a wide range of interests, but gradually came to focus on the issue that would animate his career: the role of communities—Curren would say the responsibility of communities—in the formative development of children.

AN ARISTOTELIAN REVIVAL WAS WELL UNDER WAY BY the time Curren finished graduate school in 1985.

“Debates in moral theory were getting a bit stale,” he says. An essay called “Modern Moral Philosophy,” by the British philosopher G. E. M. Anscombe laid out the problems, and her critique became enormously influential.

Moral philosophy should be “laid aside,” she wrote, starkly, “until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology, in which we are conspicuously lacking.”

One by one, she struck down each of the most influential thinkers on ethics in the modern Western tradition. What all of them shared was a reliance on a duty-based notion of ethics, without reference to any authority, foundation, or reference point.

“When you’re trying to get people to respect moral tenets, there’s a long tradition of claiming divine sourcing of the norms,” Curren says. “The Greeks thought the laws were handed to their kings on stone tablets by Zeus. It’s the story of Moses. They all told that story.” Secular philosophers jettisoned the divine, but proceeded with concepts based on religious assumptions, Anscombe argued.

What Aristotle addressed, that no one else in the Western tradition had, according to Anscombe, were psychological factors such as intention and motivation. Her article helped to reignite interest in Aristotle among philosophers, and to pave the way for interdisciplinary work with psychologists.

Curren began to explore connections between Aristotelian ethics and modern theories of motivation when he arrived at Rochester. Here were the psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, founders of an influential theory of motivation called self-determination theory.

In a 1985 book *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior*, Deci and Ryan identified basic human needs to develop our capacities, act according to our own will, and connect to others and to our social environment. Based on their preliminary research, they set forth three basic psychological needs—for autonomy, competence, and relatedness—necessary to develop the deepest engagement with life and greatest feelings of well-being.

“It’s enormously gratifying to me to actually be working with them,” Curren says about the collaboration with Deci and Ryan that developed over many years. It began with informal conversations about shared interests. Then, in 2007, they organized an interdisciplinary lecture series on happiness through the Humanities Project, an initiative begun by President Joel Seligman to foster discussion on campus regarding important humanistic questions.

Ryan had long harbored an interest in philosophy—he’d even majored in the subject in college. And when it comes to Aristotle, “my interest is longstanding,” he says.

In 2001, he and Deci first explicitly tied their work in self-determination theory to the Aristotelian idea of *eudaimonia* in an article, “On Happiness and Human Potentials.” The article responded to psychologists who were seeking the roots of happiness, which they defined, broadly speaking, as the attainment of pleasure and avoidance of pain. They declared self-determination theory *eudaimonic*, and the happiness-based approach to human well-being, *hedonic*.

Aristotle contrasted a *eudaimonic* life that fulfills human

potentialities well, with lives devoted to wealth-seeking, status-seeking, and amusement. He postulated that riches and status were not sufficient for living well, and even detracted from it.

“As we pursued this connection,” Ryan says, “we saw that *eudaimonic* thinking offers many testable empirical hypotheses.” In collaboration with Curren, their research began delving further into the connections between virtue and fulfillment.

Last year, the three coauthored “What Humans Need: Flourishing in Aristotelian Philosophy and Self-Determination Theory.” Empirical psychological research concluded that across cultures, among both genders, and in a variety of age categories, people who pursued intrinsic aspirations, including contributions to their communities, close relationships, and autonomous pursuit of personal interests, reported higher measures of happiness and well-being than those whose successes were in extrinsic aspirations such as wealth, fame, and appearance.

It might sound like a truism. Who hasn’t been told that “money can’t buy happiness”? Or, for that matter, love? But how well do contemporary institutions reflect those adages?

Not much, the authors concluded. “There are strong global economic and social forces fostering consumptive, materialistic lifestyles and selfishly focused value priorities,” they wrote. And those forces have resulted, at least in part, from a philosophical tradition, forming the basis of much mainstream economic thought, that assumed “an inherent selfishness and self-interested calculus to all interactions—views that we regard as without foundation in evolutionary science.”

If you accept the arguments of Curren, Deci, and Ryan, then redesigning institutions to foster *eudaimonia* is a tall order. But, Curren maintains, “it’s entirely possible if one pays attention to what humans actually need.”

THE CHALLENGE WAS STEEP FOR ARISTOTLE AS WELL. HE lived in the aftermath of the Peloponnesian War, which had cost both Athens and Sparta dearly.

Both states had been exceptionally stable by the standards of their world. What set them apart was that they were successful conquest states. The Athenians relied on their colonies to relieve the poverty and conflict that toppled governments elsewhere. Many of their poor were sent off to colonies, and the conquered populations provided a tax base to subsidize the poor who remained in Athens.

“With conquest no longer possible after the Peloponnesian War, the question of how to live well without the spoils of conquest was a matter of intense philosophical interest,” Curren says. “Critiques of greed and injustice were common.”

Athenian social harmony, in other words, had rested on an insecure foundation. Curren fears 21st-century social harmony, resting on the promise of unending economic growth, is on a similarly unstable footing. When he began to consider the problem of sustainability in a world of declining ecological capacity and rapid population growth, “it struck me that what the Greek moralists were struggling with, is something that we’re actually struggling with, though we don’t fully understand it yet. Which is that we’re going to have to figure out what the alternatives are to endless economic growth as a basis for having any semblance of social tranquility.”

Nonetheless, Curren sees reason to be hopeful. “The good news, if Aristotle is right, is that moderation in wealth—as in everything—is enough.” 