

**The Moral Purpose of Higher Education:
Articulacy, Strong Evaluation, and the Moral Self**

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Abstract

The moral purpose of higher education is twofold: to help students transmute functional conceptions of a good life to one that is guided by ethical frameworks that motivate strong evaluation of aspirations, motives, and life choices in the development of moral self-identity; and to equip students with the metacognitive features of moral wisdom to better cope with the permanent adversities of conflict, contingency, and evil that inescapably haunt human agency. After discussing developmental and ethical aspects of moral formation, and the common themes in psychological and philosophical perspectives on moral self-identity, I take up the first purpose by drawing important distinctions between strong and weak evaluation, and the goal of higher education to encourage students to move from legislative to judicial character and to cultivate the horizon of significance that grounds the life that is good to live. I take up the second purpose by stressing the importance of cultivating in students the capacity to engage in metacognitive processes to combat (without defeating) permanent adversities that threaten a life of ethical character. Helping students articulate ethical frameworks is underscored; and I conclude by stressing the parallel obligation of universities to engage in strong evaluation of the lofty goals of their mission statements and to commit with clarity to the horizon of significance that animates their core institutional values.

The Moral Purpose of Higher Education:

Articulacy, Strong Evaluation, and the Moral Self

“I cannot understand my own behavior. I fail to carry out the things I want to do, and I find myself doing the very things I hate” -- Letter of Paul to the Romans: 7:15¹

The induction of children and youth into the regulative norms of communal life is a universal of human societies. Indeed, from classical antiquity to the present there are few objectives pursued with more urgency than the moral formation of the younger generation. The primary responsibility for socializing children into moral norms necessarily falls upon families, and there is indeed a growing literature on the role of parents in the moral development of their children (Laible, Carlo, & Padilla-Walker, 2019). Yet the expansion of compulsory systems of education over the past century has shifted the task of moral education to one now broadly shared with schools. Although the way schools manage this task has been the source of cyclical waves of panic there is an encouraging number of strong models of effective moral-character education that attract interest across public and private school sectors alike (Nucci, Krettenauer, & Winston, 2025).

In contrast, the moral formation of emerging adults in institutions of higher education has received far less attention than at the primary and secondary levels, although there is welcome movement in this direction (Arthur, 2024; Brant, Brooks, & Lamb, 2022; Kiss & Euben, 2010). There is plenty of skepticism about whether universities are adequately discharging their historical mission to form persons of good character (Higgins, 2024; Reuben, 1996), or virtuous citizens committed to the public good (Colby et al., 2003); and there is even an argument that

¹ All scriptural references are to the Jerusalem Bible (1966)

universities have no business whatsoever forming moral and civic responsibility in students (Fish, 2003, 2008). Journalist David Brooks (2015a) laments the careerist-achievement ethos that animates the intellectual labors of many university students; and the fact that university education has abandoned traditional concerns about the formation of character and spirituality.

Of course, many universities are concerned to recenter higher education away from an exclusive preoccupation with what David Brooks (2015b) has memorably termed the “resume” virtues of the marketplace to include also the “eulogy” virtues of well-formed moral character (cf., E. Brooks, 2025). Preparing students to flourish in post-baccalaureate careers is one way to understand a university’s mission to educate students to live a good life. Certainly, the prospect of living a good life is an ambition that many university students (and their parents) readily endorse as an important educational objective, and this is most often understood in vocational terms or as choices of career. “Study everything, do anything” is the tag line of a prominent Catholic university that emphasizes the value of liberal arts in preparing students to undertake a variety of careers, vocational passions, and life pursuits.

But living a good life and living a life that is good to live are quite different things (which the study of liberal arts, it must be said, should make abundantly clear). Philosopher Christine McKinnon (1989) points out the two ways that “a good human life” can be understood. There is, first, a functional good life, one that is personally satisfying, one that yields a good career, makes a good living, and otherwise permits achievement of various goods associated with flourishing. The functional good life, understood in this way, is what is typically addressed in psychological research on psychosocial identity, purpose, generativity, well-being, life satisfaction, and related constructs of positive psychology.

But there is also an ethical sense to a good life. This good life is ethically praiseworthy if the person leading it is moved to act by ethically admirable considerations (McKinnon, 1989). This ethically good life is animated by a vision of the good, or as Charles Taylor (1989) would put it, by an ethical framework or “horizon of significance” that provides a basis for “strong evaluation” about what is worthy and unworthy, noble or base, higher or lower with respect to our desires, conduct, and aspirations². From a neo-Aristotelian perspective, the ethically good life is motivated by self-transcendent ideals which provides a sense of flourishing worth having (Kristjánsson, 2020). Certainly, a functional good life is well within the remit of higher education. The challenge of higher education is to show how a functional good life requires this ethical sense so that the person leading it could construct a self-identity around moral convictions and be capable of strong evaluation in pursuit of them, with the promise that this sort of life is good for one to live.

Of course, the functional good life need not be distinct from the ethical good life. Indeed, McKinnon (1979, p. 5) argues that the “central requirement of a functionally good life is that the one leading it have constructed for herself a character” that provides narrative focus, unity, and meaning, and that this entails constructing a good character “with ethically admirable traits and dispositions.” The functionally good is nothing, it seems, without the ethically good to give it direction and purpose. The functional good life is nothing without the ambition to

² Following Taylor (1989) strong evaluation is to take a contrastive (noble or base, better or worse, worthy or unworthy) and hierarchical (higher or lower) approach to the choices of our character. Later I take up Flanagan’s (1990) critique of strong evaluation insofar as it is deemed foundational to the very ontology of personhood, a position that is not required for my purposes.

construct a character of a certain kind. Study everything, to be sure, and do anything, so long as it yields a moral self whose functionally good life is guided by ethical frameworks.

How to transmute the functional good life into one with ethical significance is a challenging value proposition of higher education. But there is a second challenge that confronts the moral self even if good character is the determinative goal and even if a vision of the ultimate good of eudaimonia is in plain sight. This is the challenge of Saint Paul noted in the epigram: *I fail to carry out the things I want to do, and I find myself doing the very things I hate*. How are we to understand Saint Paul's Lament? We first recognize it as an all-too-human reality, but one that is barely considered in our enthusiasm for the various positive psychologies of purpose, character, well-being, and identity, or in our zeal for flourishing. Perhaps the lament is best attributed by philosophers to weakness of will or impaired phronesis; or to the judgment-action gap by psychologists; or to the ubiquity of sin by theologians.

But most certainly facing up to this challenge does not show up in the mission statements of our universities; nor is it not defeated by putting on the armor of virtue or basking in eudaimonia. Instead, we must face what John Kekes (1995) has called the "permanent adversities" of conflict, contingency, and evil (there could be others). In his view the permanent adversities "are *in us* as well as outside of us. It is human agency itself that is permeated by contingency, conflict and evil, so no effort of ours could succeed in getting rid of them" (Kekes 1995, p. 79). Yet we can cope with the permanent adversities even if we cannot defeat them, and one purpose of higher education is that it provides the opportunity to equip the moral self with the wisdom required to face up to them.

The moral purpose of higher education, then, is twofold, and like preparation for any scrimmage it should yield a game plan for offense and for defense. The offensive game plan is to consolidate the development of moral self-identity around ethical frameworks that are action-guiding for the long haul across the life course. This will require developing an orientation to the good that becomes essential to identity; and for building a character fit for moral purpose. It will require an increasing capacity for strong evaluation about the worthiness of our desires and about the kinds of life worth living. How to improve articulacy about moral frameworks should be figured into accounts of moral formation in higher education.

The defensive game plan requires fortifying the moral self with facets of moral wisdom that make it possible to confront the permanent adversities, and in this way provide a way to cope with the inevitable confounding of moral character so memorably lamented by Saint Paul. I will describe the facets of moral wisdom by reference to the several strategies identified by Kekes (1995). These strategies can be linked with knowledge and appraisal processes associated with social cognitive approaches to personality (e.g., Cervone, 2004, 2005; Cervone & Tripathi, 2009) and standard accounts of metacognition in educational and developmental science (Lapsley, 2026; Schraw & Moshman, 1995). Focusing on metacognitive knowledge and appraisal will pay off in two ways. First, it grounds the character of the moral self to dispositional features of personality. Second, it operationalizes the work of strong evaluation and practical reasoning and in a way that is responsive to the educational mission of universities.

In the next section I make the case that moral formation is the project of the life course, but that there are conceptual and disciplinary impediments to getting a handle on it. I will settle upon social cognitive approaches to moral self-identity to understand the dispositional features

of character. My preference for self-identity as the organizing feature of moral personality has both a philosophical (Taylor, 1989) and psychological (Blasi, 1984; Erikson, 1968; Lapsley, 2016) source. Indeed, the convergence of these perspectives is so striking that it constitutes a powerful integrative model of lifespan moral psychology. I then take up the permanent adversities and the metacognitive knowledge and control processes that would fortify the moral self with the wisdom required to cope with them. I will conclude with a reflection on the role of higher education in improving articulation of moral frameworks and the cultivation of metacognitive strong evaluation in the lifespan development of the moral self.

Moral Formation

The question of moral formation, at any age, requires some understanding of “moral” and of “formation.” It will also require some understanding of the very qualities that we intend to form.

Moral Formation. How should we understand the very notion of *formation*? The Cambridge English Dictionary defines formation as “development into a particular thing or shape,” but this raises the question concerning which perspective on development offers the best insights on the way moral formation becomes this “particular shape or thing.” From a relational-developmental perspective the developing person is in continuous dynamic interaction with overlapping systems of social-cultural influence that drive the possibility of change and plasticity at any point during the life course (Lerner & Lerner, 2019). Consequently, moral formation is a project of the entire life course. It begins in infancy and extends to the last decades of life (Damon, 1996; Hamlin, 2013; Lefebvre, Goddeeris, Hamzagic, & Krettenauer,

2023; Krettenauer, 2022). Hence, there is never a time when the moral self is not in formation or reformation, in discovery or recovery, and its distinctive features, its manner of expression, the circumstances that favor or impede it, are expected to show substantial developmental variation.

There is reason to expect the college experience of emerging adulthood to catalyze the moral formation of students (Lapsley, LaPorte & Kelley, 2022; Lapsley & Hardy, 2017). It is during emerging adulthood when the impending realities of adult life come into clearer focus; and it is also when, possibly in response, mean level change in personality traits is most prominent (Roberts, Walton & Viechtbauer, 2006) and the need to construct a viable narrative identity is most urgently felt (McAdams, 2015). How the challenges of emerging adulthood are resolved “will either lend forward-leaning momentum into a life that is fulfilled, unified, and whole, or else result in one that seems stagnant, fraying, and unfulfilled” (Lapsley & Hardy, 2017, p. 15).

Moral Formation. What should be the target of *moral* formation in higher education? Is it deliberative skill in discerning maximum utility or prescriptive obligations that have universalizable application? Is it the ability to resolve hard case dilemmas, or to recognize the force of categorical imperatives when confronted with them? Do we want students to defeat ethical relativism? Become committed to civic engagement and social justice? Sort out complex issues into their proper moral, conventional, or personal domain? Is it a matter of inculcating virtues and, if so, which ones have priority if not all of them? Should we place our strategic bets on the education of deontic or aretaic considerations (or somehow, both)? These are all defensible targets of moral education, but it also illustrates the fact that what counts as falling within the moral domain is associated with sometimes competing traditions in the philosophical

and empirical wings of moral psychology, so what is targeted for educational formation in higher education will hinge importantly on where we draw the boundary.

There is an argument that modern moral philosophy (and the empirical moral psychology that it inspires) draws the boundary too narrowly around deontological concerns (Pincoffs, 1986; Taylor, 1989; Williams, 1985). This “morality system,” as Williams (1985) called it, is understood mostly along Kantian lines. In the Kantian system moral deliberation is driven by abstractness and impartiality to assist the moral agent in the discernment of prescriptive obligations in interpersonal situations involving harm, justice, rights, and duties. Kantian moral judgments have a universalizable intent and issue action-guiding imperatives applicable to all rational agents in similar circumstances.

Two Perspectives on Moral Self-Identity

It is, of course, important for agents to develop an astute sense of when and how moral obligations make demands upon us in our relationship with others³. But Taylor (1989, p.3) argues that this approach “has tended to focus on what is right to do rather than on what it is good to be, on defining the content of obligation rather than the nature of the good life; and it has left no conceptual place for a notion of the good as the object of our love or allegiance.” As a result, it has “accredited a cramped and truncated view of morality” that elides “a whole range of issues concerning how to live the best possible life.” In his view there are other moral

³ Taylor (1989, p. 4) writes that “...the most urgent and powerful cluster of demands that we recognize as moral concern the respect for life, integrity, and well-being, even flourishing of others. They are the ones we infringe when we kill or maim others, steal their property, strike fear in them, and rob them of peace, or even refrain from helping them when they are in distress. Virtually everyone feels these demands, and they have been acknowledged in all human societies.” Our moral intuitions on this score are “uncommonly deep, powerful, and universal.” But Taylor’s point is that we face other moral questions that cannot be resolved in universalist terms.

ideals and goals that cannot be resolved into universal prescription impartially derived, and these include questions such as how am I going to live my life, what kind of life fulfils the promise implicit in my talents, and what constitutes a good life to live (Abbey, 2000).

These questions, from a psychological perspective, are also essential to the pressing identity work of emerging adulthood. Indeed, Erikson argued that ethical capacity is the “true criterion of identity” (1968, p. 39), but also that “identity and fidelity are necessary for ethical strength” (1964, p. 126). For Erikson, identity work is a context for taking a stand on existential questions concerning one’s basic life commitments. What is my life for? What matters so much I am willing to pledge my fidelity to it? One establishes an identity, in Erikson’s view, when one identifies with some way of being in the world, some ideology or vocation or cause, some ground project(s); and one is then identified in turn by a community that understands and welcomes that choice.

But identity work is inescapably varied. Our personalities are thickened by layers of multiple identifications. Answering the question “Who am I?” might include, for example, ideological or political preferences, ethno-racial or gender identities, sexual orientation, professional identity, relational status, even sports and crowd affiliations, musical genres, and generational identifications, among others. Somewhere within this nexus of sometimes conflicting identifications is morality and the demands of virtue and the sort of person one claims or aspires to be. A moral identity is constructed, on a prominent account, when morality

is prioritized as something important, central, and essential for self-understanding (Blasi, 1984, 1989).⁴

Taylor (1989) also draws, from a philosophical perspective, a similar connection between identity and morality. Selfhood and morality, in his view, are inextricably intertwined. “To know who you are,” he writes, “is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you, and what is trivial and secondary” (p. 28). To formulate an answer to the identity question “Who am I?” is to reference a set of commitments and identifications “which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose” (Taylor, 1989, p. 27).

Notice that the answer to the identity question (“Who am I?”) has a double aspect. One answer points to the commitments and identifications that ground a functional good life understood from a psychosocial perspective. Another answer points to the commitments and identifications that ground the morally good life from the perspective of ethical frameworks and a vision of the good that provides a standpoint, a “horizon of significance,” for judging what is good and valuable in the functional good life. We will see that the multiplicity of identity options that confront the functional good life and the clamoring of moral goods that confronts

⁴ Blasi’s (1984, 1989) account of moral identity was originally conceived to address the so-called “judgment-action” gap. It inspired a generation of largely favorable research attesting to its role in predicting a wide range of positive moral behavior and attitudes and counter-indicating or moderating problematic behavior. Recent meta-analyses estimate effect sizes between .22 and .34 (Goering et al, 2024; Hertz & Krettenauer, 2016). The construct continues to attract innovative theoretical revision, including the possibility that moral identity has a dark side (e.g., Krettenauer, in press, 2021; Krettenauer & Stichter, 2023). I will make a few additional suggestions (see also, Lapsley, 2026, 2016)

the ethical good life will require strong evaluation (Taylor, 1985) and moral wisdom (Kekes, 1995) to sort out.

Incommensurable Options. Indeed, the plurality of identity options and the clamor of moral goods underscores an important developmental challenge facing emerging adults: There are many qualitatively different things to incorporate into a fully human life and some of them, while worthy of affirmation, are incompatible or incommensurate with others. Every matriculating college senior knows this quite well. As Taylor (1989, p. 61) points out, “There is no guarantee that universally valued goods should be perfectly combinable and certainly not in all situations.” Kekes (1995) references this conflict as one of the permanent adversities that cling to human agency. Choosing one course of action or one set of commitments premised on one set of values leaves other highly sought values unrealized. All conceptions of a good life face the permanent adversity of incompatible and incommensurable values, goals, and purposes, and often the road(s) not taken will leave a mark that is not completely effaced at the moment of choosing.⁵

Yet, as Abbey (2000) noted, insofar as there are always multiple goods to pursue, not all will be judged in the same light. Some will be recognized as more worthy, more important, more valuable than others. Blasi (1984) has a similar take on moral identity – some goods will be judged essential, central, more important and more valuable to self-understanding than others. Hence, for both Taylor (1989) and Blasi (1984) strong evaluation is a necessary part of moral identity. Strong evaluators make qualitative distinctions about what is higher or lower, mean or

⁵ Consider the sentiment in W.H. Auden’s (2022) birthday poem *Many Happy Returns*: “All the possibilities/that it had to reject are/ what give life and warmth to/an actual character/then...since all self-knowledge/tempts man into envy/may you...love without desiring all that you are not.”

courageous, noble or base; and “a good test of whether an evaluation is ‘strong’ is whether it can be the basis for attitudes of admiration or contempt” (Taylor, 1989, p. 523) --- admiration, pride and satisfaction when acting in accord with a strongly valued good, but contempt, frustration, and dejection when acting against it. Saint Paul seemed to know something about the downside of strong evaluation.

Strong Evaluation and Higher Education.

One lesson is that higher education is a context where emerging adults develop a sense of strong evaluation about what is higher or lower following Taylor’s account of moral identity; and what goods are judged essential, important, and central for self-understanding, following Blasi’s account. Strong evaluation is a necessary part of the moral identity of persons (Abbey, 2000). Higher education should aim at making strong evaluation more articulable, moving it from something tacit to explicit in the moral identity work of emerging adults. Indeed, Taylor (1989) argues that articulacy has several functions, and that we need more of it than less, a point that I take up later.

Weak Evaluation. But not everyone is sold on strong evaluation. Flanagan (1990) argued, for example, that Taylor’s strong evaluation overestimates the degree of articulateness and reflection required for personhood and identity. It is too intellectualistic. On his view lives governed by weak evaluation, guided by non-ethical (but not counter-ethical) assessments suits most of us just fine.⁶ “Identity and goodness,” he writes, “do not require reflectiveness to any

⁶ On this point Flanagan urges readers to imagine a person who lives a life built around love of baseball, or, using Rawls’s example, around devotion to grass, but who might otherwise “fully abide by what morality, commonsensically construed, demands” (p. 41). I would argue, from a social cognitive perspective, that this is a

significant degree, nor is distinctly ethical identification the indispensable font of all modern identity.” What are the minimal criteria for what constitutes a person? Flanagan suggests three criteria: 1) Identity is created in the context of social relations (the *intersubjective self*); 2) this requires a minimal degree of *self-comprehension*; and 3) intersubjective relations are not merely of instrumental value (*normative intersubjectivity*). According to Flanagan (1990) it is entirely possible to satisfy these three conditions without being a strong evaluator. He writes “normal persons often lack a deep reflective appreciation of who they are. The sort of self-awareness required for personhood can be extremely dim and inchoate. Furthermore, it can fail to track the truth” (p. 44).

Tolstoy’s “noble peasants” are his example of persons who are unreflective and inarticulate but whose lives nonetheless reflect certain values, such as love, compassion, resignation to God’s will, and “a humble comprehension of their role in carrying out certain communal projects whose origins are antecedent to their own births and that will continue long after they die.” (p. 45). Yet, he continues, “it is not clear that their intersubjectivity is very reflectively held or that it is subject to articulate containment by them in the form of some abstract philosophical truth” (p. 45). Perhaps university professors will recognize something like noble peasants in their own classrooms.

So, Flanagan argues that strong evaluation is not, in fact, a basic feature of moral life. It is neither descriptive of how people are nor is it normatively required for full personhood. Yet there are aspects of Taylor’s take on strong evaluation that are seemingly responsive to this

matter of which framework, ethical or otherwise, is chronically accessible for guiding one’s life, and that moral education, at any level, should have something to do with the accessibility of ethical frameworks.

criticism (although it introduces a tension of its own). Taylor does not believe, for example, that strong evaluation is involved in every decision. He does not think that individuals always take a contrastive and hierarchical approach to their desires, emotions, and judgments, or that they are even aware of doing so when they do make qualitative distinctions (Abbey, 2000). Although everyone works from ethical frameworks, they may not be conscious of it. The larger moral picture that is the background to their discernment can be dim or inchoate, perceived through the glass darkly (as Saint Paul might put it)⁷, or at least “commonsensically construed” by lovers of baseball, blades of grass, or other life-guiding enthusiasms.

Although this seems to move the argument in the direction of Flanagan’s weak evaluation, nonetheless there is something deflationary about a concept of strong evaluation that allows individuals to be moved by moral arguments of which they are not fully aware. Flanagan’s main objection to strong evaluation is that Taylor uses it to define personhood as requiring ethical assessments. “I conclude,” he writes, “that the best way to understand the contrast between strong and weak evaluation is that one involves ethical assessments, on the one hand, and any kind of non-ethical assessment, on the other” (Flanagan, 1990, p. 45). But once the definitional issue of personhood is set aside, there is still a robust role for strong evaluation to play in making ethical assessments, in making second-order judgments about the worthiness of desires; and there remains a moral purpose for higher education in helping emerging adults improve their articulacy in using strongly evaluative language for this purpose. Improving articulacy is a way to move ethical considerations from the background to the

⁷ 1 Corinthians: 12:13

foreground, from tacit to explicit, from dimly accessible to chronically accessible, from what it means to live the functional good life to the life that is good to live. This is not an argument about how to define persons. Improving articulacy and accessibility of ethical frameworks is an educational objective for all persons, including noble peasants, baseball devotees, undergraduates, and not a few university professors.

Legislative and Judicial Character In the first chapter in his account of moral wisdom Kekes (1995) makes a distinction between two orders of virtue that is more useful for my purpose insofar as it elides the discussion about whether strong evaluation is essential for personhood and gives a cleaner role for strong evaluation absent this debate. First-order virtues he calls the “legislative” aspect of character. They provide direction to natural and normal human tendencies, guiding our actions in pursuit of substantive desires that accord with some conception of a good life. The object of first-order virtues is to help determine what is to be done in concrete situations where such a conception is at stake.

Second-order virtues define the “judicial” aspect of our character. These are action-guiding in the pursuit of regulative (versus substantive) desires and so exercise a metacognitive function. If the immediate object of first-order legislative virtues is what should be done in pursuit of a functional good life, the immediate object of second-order judicial virtues is the fully transparent *development of character*. On Kekes’s view, second-order virtues are reflexive. They are motivated by the desire to make our lives better, and this requires some understanding of what a good life could be. Most of us probably get by chasing the substantive desires of our legislative character, and with a mostly functional understanding of a good life. Judicial character, on the other hand, exercises strong evaluation over substantive desires and legislative

character. It is guided by ethical frameworks, a horizon of significance, concerning what a good life could be. Hence, although the functional good life lives out the virtues of legislative character, the ethical good life is the preoccupation of judicial character.

The moral purpose of higher education, it would seem, is the development of judicial character that is fit for purpose for the long haul of adulthood. This will require the cultivation of moral wisdom because the long haul of adulthood will be confronted with permanent adversities that will severely challenge legislative character (Kekes, 1995). It will also challenge Blasian moral identity (see Krettenauer, 2021 for other challenges). One can imagine emerging adults (much like Tolstoy's noble peasants) foreclosing on identity commitments to traditional morality without burdensome reflection, passively accepting conventional patterns of what a functional good life could be, just as they might foreclose upon identity commitments in the psychosocial sense. Certainly, many undergraduates stumble along beaten paths, doing the conventionally expected thing, making unduly considered commitments to majors, careers, and occupations. This kind of identity work yields a "fortuitous" character, as Kekes put it, rather than a "deliberative" character. A life of fortuitous character, forming moral identity around legislative virtues, is probably fine until it bumps into the permanent adversities, at which point the echo of Saint Paul's Lament comes to be heard with particular resonance. Forming deliberative character around the facets of moral wisdom is another way to frame the moral purpose of higher education.

Permanent Adversities

Kekes (1995) calls contingency, conflict, and evil the permanent adversities that are ineradicably common features of creatures like us. They stand in the way of our attempt to live good lives, and we need moral wisdom to cope with them. I took up the matter of conflict earlier when discussing the need for strong evaluation to sort out incompatible and incommensurable identity options. There is not a univocal vision of a good life, and the values that conduce to a good life may exclude each other, making it impossible to live according to them.

Moreover, the permanent adversity of contingency reminds us that even the achievement of perfect virtue is no guarantee of a good life. Experience teaches that good motives, decency, firm resolve, and virtues, are at the mercy of exigencies that are indifferent to these things. To enjoy the benefits of our own efforts towards self-improvement will require external goods over which we have no control. Good lives do not always depend on our own efforts, and the cloak of character is not an impenetrable shield against countervailing contingencies in the contexts that frame the settings of our lives. As Kekes (1995 p. 54) put it, “The fact remains ...that even the most successful of our efforts can only be necessary and never sufficient for good lives. For whether we can make successful efforts depends on the possession of external goods.”

But I want to focus on evil, the third permanent adversity, insofar as it illustrates why constructs like moral identity (or any of the favored constructs of positive psychology) can fall short of the moral line to gain. What Kekes (1995) has in mind is the wickedness that pervades our life projects though it is cloaked as good intentions. Indeed, the permanent adversity of evil

prevents our general understanding of evil from attaching to our own behavior in moments of action. Kekes (1995, p. 68) writes:

Their own cruelty is seen by them as justice, selfishness as claiming their due, hatred as just condemnation, envy as commitment to equality, or fanaticism as being principled.

They know that cruelty, selfishness, hatred, envy, and fanaticism are evil, but they do not know that their own actions exemplify these evils. And they do not know it because they foster or allow something in themselves that precludes them from seeing the true nature of their conduct.

We are all a complex *mélange* of motives and inclinations, of virtues and vices, and we should not retreat from the uncomfortable truth that it is sometimes hard to tell the difference. Iris Murdoch (2001, p. 51) put the matter famously: “In the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego.”

Kekes (1995) encourages the cultivation of moral wisdom to help us cope with the permanent adversities (without defeating them). For Kekes moral wisdom is a second-order psychological capacity that enables individuals to judge rightly on important matters. In this sense moral wisdom is a metacognitive capacity. Moreover, as a psychological capacity it can be developed and possessed by degree. To the extent that it takes root and endures it can be considered a character trait, and also a virtue insofar as this character trait is prized, valued, and admired. Hence moral wisdom is both metacognitive and personological.

Kekes describes moral wisdom in terms of several facets, which I take up below, but first some preliminary points are in order. I have not used the terms strong evaluation and moral

wisdom interchangeably or as synonyms out of respect for their separate sources in the theories of Taylor and Kekes, respectively. Moreover, these two constructs have different work to do. Strong evaluation is part of the “offensive game plan” to orient the self around moral projects. It is deployed to help us make qualitative discriminations about desires, behavior, and forms of life that are higher and lower, noble or base, judged against a horizon of significance that gives us a perspective on our choices. Moral wisdom is the “defensive game plan” to cope with the permanent adversities that rush to sack the moral self and intercept our moral ambitions. Both game plans are ideally unified in the scrimmage of moral life.

The two constructs nonetheless point to the same suite of knowledge-and-appraisal social cognitive psychological processes that are metacognitive in nature. As such the consensus account of metacognition in developmental and educational psychology should provide the psychological specification of how they work. In addition, social cognitive approaches to personality (e.g., Cervone, 2005; Cervone & Tripathi, 2009) also provides an apt description of moral wisdom to the extent that it is, indeed, personological. Hence, social cognitive personality theory and metacognition are sufficient for describing the psychology of Taylor’s strong evaluation and Kekes’s moral wisdom, or any virtue theory that appeals to second-order practical reasoning (Lapsley, 2026).

Moral Wisdom

Moral wisdom consists of three facets: knowledge, evaluation, and judgment. Knowledge is of permanent adversities and how it affects our character. Evaluation and judgement are recruited to exercise control over our desires. These facets are required to move

moral identity from the kind that is fortuitous and legislative to forms that are deliberative and judicial. These facets of moral wisdom align with the knowledge-and-appraisal processes in Cervone's (2004) social cognitive account of personality architecture.⁸ The facets are also metacognitive and align with standard accounts in developmental and educational psychology.

On the standard account metacognition has two components: 1) metacognitive knowledge and 2) metacognitive regulation processes (Schraw & Moshman, 1995). Metacognitive knowledge is declarative (knowing *that*), procedural (knowing *how*) and conditional (knowing *when* or *how*). Metacognitive regulation processes include *planning*, *selection*, *monitoring*, and *evaluating* (among others). I have argued that Kekes's facets of moral wisdom can be suitably described by this standard account (Lapsley, 2026).

Metacognitive Knowledge. Declarative moral wisdom is *knowing that* contingency, conflict and evil are permanent adversities that challenge our character and our effort to live a good life. The procedural aspect of moral wisdom is *knowing how* to align (primary and secondary) values to conceptions of good lives. For Kekes, primary values are invariant considerations that attach to human beings as such, for example, bodily needs, protection from elements, the goods of intimacy, a reliable social order. Secondary values are those that attach to variable conceptions of good lives, including options for identity commitment and living a life of purpose ---just the sort of considerations that most urgently confront university students.

⁸ As noted previously Kekes (1989) thought that moral wisdom, to the extent that it is a psychological capacity of lasting importance, can be identified as character trait; and also, as a virtue to the extent that this character trait is valued and admired. The language of traits is common in virtue theory and character psychology, but I do not adopt it here. My preference is for social cognitive approaches to personality, as described by the CAPS (Mischel & Shoda, 1998) and KAPA meta-theories Cervone & Shoda, 1999; Cervone & Little, 2015) and their application to moral personality (Boegershausen, Aquino, & Reed, 2015; Aquino & Reed, 2002; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004; Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009)

Finally, the conditional aspect of metacognition, *knowing how* and *when*, recalls Aristotle's conception of virtue, or the practical wisdom (*phronesis*) that attaches to virtue: which is to recruit moral knowledge at the right times in the proper situations, with the right motive, in the right way.

Metacognitive Regulation. Moral wisdom regulation includes metacognitive *planning*, *selection*, *monitoring*, and *evaluation*.⁹ Planning involves deciding what future-oriented steps to take to strengthen (or weaken) enduring patterns in our deliberative character. Selection involves choosing those situations that afford cultivation of virtues while avoiding those that trigger temptations to vice. Agents who track their motivation with self-reflective transparency are exercising metacognitive monitoring; and metacognitive evaluation includes regulative (second order) evaluation of substantive desires in light of the agent's character and conception of a good life.

Metacognition is now commonly invoked to describe the work of practical reasoning, virtues, and wisdom (Green, 2019; Grossman et al., 2020; Stichter, 2024; Kristjánsson, Fowers, Darnell, & Pollard, 2020). As Lepock (2014, p. 46) put it, "we can use empirical studies of metacognition to inform and understand what is necessary for virtue." I concur that metacognition is a powerful way to understand all appeals by virtue theories to second-order processes, including Taylor's strong evaluation, Kekes's moral wisdom, Frankfurt's (1988) second-order desires, Blasi's moral identity integrity, and practical reasoning more generally.

⁹ Kekes (1995) also discusses three modes of self-reflection that are needed to block internal obstacles in the way of our judgment. These he calls *moral imagination*, *self-knowledge*, and *moral depth*. I discuss these facets elsewhere in terms of metacognitive self-regulative control processes (Lapsley, 2026).

Appealing to the standard model of metacognition in developmental and educational psychology has three important advantages: 1) it moves discussion of metacognition in moral psychology away from invocations that are metaphoric, imprecise, or vague; 2) it operationalizes second-order processes in virtue theories in ways that align with literatures in empirical psychology; and 3) it provides a model for developing educational strategies to improve articulacy, strong evaluation, and moral wisdom.

Moral and Other Wisdom Models. The present metacognitive interpretation of Kekes's moral wisdom raises the question of how this relates to other wisdom models, including accounts of phronesis or practical wisdom (see Lapsley, 2026, for an extended discussion). The so-called Common Wisdom Model (CWM), for example, is similar to the present account of moral wisdom to the extent that it embraces "morally-grounded excellence in social cognitive processes" (Grossman et al., 2020 p. 103) and identifies wisdom with both moral aspirations and perspectival metacognition. Certainly, CWM's moral aspirations and Taylor's horizon of significance are related notions; and the language of metacognition is also common to both models.

But the approaches differ in how metacognition is understood. Rather than in terms of metacognitive knowledge and regulation processes, as outlined here, CWM links metacognitive wisdom to a suite of intellectual virtues (in my view). Moreover, the CWM is silent about how to connect wisdom with the agency and character of the moral self or how to deploy perspectival metacognition to cope with permanent adversities (it was not conceived, of course, with this problem in mind). This also makes recourse to other psychological models of wisdom less appealing.

Two recent models of practical wisdom are relevant sources of insights for the conduct of moral life. The neo-Aristotelian Phronesis Model (APM) is a multi-component model whereby practical wisdom is a faculty that discerns ethically-relevant features of situations, adjudicates the application of virtues in situationally-appropriate ways, provides a blueprint for moral identity to follow, and infuses emotions with reason (Darnell et al. 2019; Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2023). The Aretai Model of phronesis understands practical wisdom as a form of ethical expertise (DeCaro, Marraffa & Vaccarezza, 2021). Both models should have some affinity with the account of moral wisdom offered here. Although I have expressed some doubts about phronetic models of practical wisdom (Lapsley, 2021, 2019; cf., Miller, 2021; De Caro, Navarini & Vaccarezza, 2024), it was not to eliminate practice reasoning from the wisdom discourse but to anchor it to well-attested accounts of metacognition in the developmental and educational psychology literature and to social cognitive accounts of moral personality.

Summary, Lessons, and Articulatory

Summary. The moral purpose of higher education has come up in a number of ways throughout this paper. Let's recap: Higher education is the context where a functional good life is considered from the perspective of a life good to live. This life good to live reflects and enacts a commitment to develop a character of a certain kind, a moral self-identity, organized around ethical frameworks that provide the basis for making qualitative discriminations about forms of life that are higher or lower, worthy or unworthy, noble or base. A pattern of strong evaluation instantiates and makes visible the ethical frameworks, the horizon of significance, that are the

very ground of moral self-identity. Higher education should improve students' articulacy in using strongly evaluative language like this in order to move ethical reflection to the explicitly considered, chronically accessible forefront of deliberative character.

Put simply, strong evaluation and articulacy are two important moral goals of higher education. Unless these goals are realized moral self-identity remains inchoate, dim, fortuitous; or else serviceable for legislative aspects of character until it is found wanting in the face of permanent adversities. One hopes that higher education can help students articulate the horizons of significance worthy of a moral self. But higher education must also help students play defense by equipping them with the facets of metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive regulation that is characteristic of moral wisdom. This too, is a form of strong evaluation, and without it the judicial character of moral self-identity will fall victim to the permanent adversities that haunt human agency.

Lessons. How does higher education deliver strong evaluation, articulacy, and the metacognitive features of moral wisdom? Edward Brooks (2025) identified model programs at several universities that encourage students' reflection on virtues and the common good. Colby and colleagues (2008) provide a wide range of strategies for use in higher education to better prepare undergraduates for their moral and civic responsibilities as citizens, not a few of which (e.g., service learning) are extensions of useful strategies at the secondary level. There is also an argument that faith-based institutions of higher education should be in a better position to articulate visions of the moral good – something like Taylor's horizon of significance – around which undergraduates can organize self-identity (Glanzer, 2010; Glanzer & Ream, 2009; King, Schnitker & Houlberg, 2020).

Yet it is also true that moral-character formation is immanent to all forms of education whenever there are reflection and discussion of right relations and what is worth doing (Stengel & Tom, 2006). Recurring waves of cultural panic notwithstanding, it has never been absent from higher education (or at any level.) There is inevitable instruction in virtues in any well-run seminar (Roche, 2009), for example, and an influential model of character education points out that values can be “caught,” if not explicitly “taught” in schools where core values are infused, modeled, or otherwise embedded in the hidden curriculum (Jubilee Center Framework for Character and Virtues, 2022), and this is undoubtedly true for higher as for secondary education. So moral formation is already part of the collegiate experience, although perhaps in ways inchoate, dim, and inarticulate.

Of course, values and virtue can also be taught as well as caught (Arthur, 2003; Arthur, Kristjánsson, Harrison, Sanderse, & Wright, 2016). As noted earlier, many of the moral frameworks that guide legislative character are unproblematic background knowledge, something tacit and unspoken, until a moment of crisis forces us to spell it out and defend. Higher education should provide moments like this in the normal course of things, and there is a compelling case to be made for articulacy.

Articulacy. Abbey (2000) notes several advantages to articulacy in Taylor’s moral theory. For example, the very exercise of strong evaluation across the many domains of experience is a way of articulating ethical frameworks. Taylor writes “...when we try to spell out what it is we suppose when we judge that a certain form of life is truly worthwhile, or place our dignity in a certain achievement or status, or define our moral obligations in a certain way, we find ourselves articulating inter alia what I have been calling here ‘frameworks’ (Taylor, 1989, p. 26).

And given the tight connection that Taylor draws between selfhood and morality, articulating frameworks also contributes to self-knowledge and transparency (Abbey, 2000). I should think it a sign of moral progress, and not despair, that individuals, at some point in their moral formation, find themselves uttering something like St. Paul's Lament in the epigram.

Moreover, articulating the background to our values forces us to recognize the complexity of moral life and its different sources, checking our tendency to simplicity and reductionism, but also increasing the tendency of rational debate and evaluation of moral goods. Articulation also empowers. It identifies what we find moving about it and why we love committing to it. On this point Abbey (2000) credits Taylor for bringing out what she calls the "erotic" aspect of articulacy and the moral life; and it channels what Frankfurt had in mind when he underscores the "importance of what we care about" in guiding second-order desires.

A final point about articulacy. On Abbey's (2000) account, philosophical analysis is not the only form of articulation and, indeed, it might be the weakest form. Other forms of articulation include poetry, literature, the visual and performing arts, music, prayer, ritual, the experience of aesthetic or religious awe, the lessons of biography and history, among others¹⁰. These are the very disciplines of the university. These are the tools available to higher education to advance the moral formation of students ---but only if institutions of higher education seize them with a sense of deliberative purpose.

¹⁰ Indeed, a philosophical tradition associated with Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, and Wittgenstein, and with Tolstoy, argue that ethical truths can be communicated only indirectly, not by didactic arguments but by examples, by showing and not by saying, through art, fables, parables, poetry, stories, aphorism (Janik & Toulmin, 1973).

Institutions also have a parallel obligation for strong evaluation of impediments to living out the lofty goals of their mission statements. They also have as much obligation to develop their institutional character and to articulate with bracing clarity the horizon of significance that animate their core values as do students whose character is on the syllabus. Students and institutions must walk the same developmental journey together, face to face, or else see through the glass darkly the permanent adversities that shadow the way forward.

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