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**Character education in a pluralistic context:  
can and should we teach values?**

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**Abstract**

The last two years have seen a resurgence of interest from the UK Government and Department for Education in character education and the role of the school in educating students in more than just academics. The notion of school-driven character education is far from new and although few would disagree with the principle of cultivating good character in young people, the diversity of values in pluralistic societies and schools raises serious questions of whether it is possible or even legitimate to teach character. Here, I outline what character education does and does not set out to do, identify the issues of delivering character education in an educational context which some have argued is not fit for purpose, and offer some thoughts on its value in a society, which, increasingly, finds its diverse values in conflict with one another.

## Context

In September 2014, Secretary of State for Education Nicky Morgan announced that she had added a 'fifth priority' for the Department for Education to focus on under her leadership, the development of young people 'as well-rounded individuals', with an education that emphasises 'character, resilience, grit', and prepares young people 'for life in Britain' (Whittaker, 2015). Just two months later, in November 2014, a Department for Education report was published, advising head teachers and staff of maintained schools how to teach 'fundamental British values' as part of their mandatory spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) education (DfE, 2014, p.4). The report affirms that pupils should be encouraged in their education to regard people 'of all faiths, races and cultures with respect and tolerance', but when it comes to the complex issue of disentangling how 'different people may hold different views about what is "right" and "wrong"', the report hints at conflicting religious values, and takes a legalistic perspective, emphasising that citizens in England are subject to its civil and criminal laws and that there may be a difference between these laws and religious ones (DfE, 2014, p.4).

Like the imperative to imbue students with good character, concerns about the conflict between the laws of the land and the laws of the religions that make up the diverse society in which we live, are nothing new. Britain is an increasingly multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society (Jivraj, 2012, p.1). Historically, at times, and particularly in urban areas of high diversity this multi-culturalism has led to clashes of socio-political values (for example the tensions in the West Midlands Smethwick district, politicised by the 1964 elections, the Bradford race riots and more recently, in the wake of terrorist attacks by British radical Islamists – including home-grown terror – aggression towards Muslim communities and mosques). In a culture of increasing diversity and increasing tensions politicians, educators and policy experts have been acutely aware of the need for caution in discussing British values, without exerting the hegemony of Christian and typically western values in a culture characterised by religious and cultural diversity. Indeed, Britain would not be so characterised by diversity were it not for the morally outmoded values of imperialism and colonialism which were for so long part of the national identity and which have contributed to so many of the international political and social problems today.

The last two years alone have presented the Department for Education and society more broadly with some serious challenges to the place of the school in cultivating, controlling or challenging ideologies and identities. In March 2014 Birmingham City Council and the Department for Education announced they were investigating reports of a Trojan horse plot to overthrow head teachers in Birmingham academies and install Islamist governors. The ongoing investigation led to snap inspections from Ofsted, schools placed in special measures and questions over Ofsted's ability to properly recognise and manage the risks of extremism in British schools. More recently, in 2015, Nicky Morgan personally entered the fray in the case of three London schoolgirls who were believed to have travelled to Syria to join the

Islamic State group. In a letter to Bethnal Green Academy's principal, Morgan wrote of the need to support the peers of the missing schoolgirls, ensuring they remain in an environment where 'fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect and tolerance' are promoted (Morgan, 2015). The last twelve months have seen the Islamic State group launch deadly assaults in France and Denmark, as reprisals for attacks on the values of Islam. Although France and Denmark differ significantly in the role of religion in the polity – Christianity is entrenched in Danish history, and France famously adheres to a policy of *laïcité*, separation of religion and state – both the Danish and French journalists and publications that were targeted in the attacks have previously been criticised for their attitude toward religious sensibilities, particularly Islamic (the *Jyllands-Posten* newspaper controversy in Denmark began in 2005 with the publication of 12 cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad and the French publication *Charlie Hebdo* was attacked in 2011 prior to the shootings in January 2015). Alongside a rise in Islamism in the UK there is the extreme response from a British far right characterised by racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia and intolerance. The organisation Britain First was established in 2011, a splinter group of the British National Party. A primary strategy of Britain First has been to tap into the Facebook generation. Using emotive news stories, most notoriously the 2013 murder of soldier Lee Rigby in Dulwich, and click-bait images such as the poppy, abused animals and Princess Diana, the organisation captures the engagement of young and uninformed social media users and uses them to promote the group's extreme views under the guise of sharing British values of patriotism, charity and social justice.

It is not the contention here that it is the job of schools to police the lives of its students outside of the classroom (although some public responses to the London schoolgirls' journey to Syria did suggest that schools do bear this responsibility). What this brief picture illustrates is that young people are not educated in a political, cultural or religious vacuum; they are exposed to a range of ideologies, views and values outside of the classroom. If schools are to take on the responsibility of explicitly educating the characters as well as the minds of their students, they need to be clear what exactly character education sets out to achieve, and develop a strong and committed response to the values it seeks to challenge. It remains a woolly issue; the week after Morgan's initial announcement that character education was to be a fifth priority of the Conservative-led Department for Education, *Progress*, the organisation of progressive Labour party members seized upon the announcement and questioned what exactly the priority on character education would 'mean in delivery' (Crowley, 2014). Morgan's policy has gained momentum and form, however, with a £3.5 million fund opened in January 2015 by the Department for Education, for schools, colleges and organisations to apply to for character education projects, to help young people 'to emerge from education better equipped to thrive in modern Britain' (DfE, 2015).

## **What is Character Education?**

Modern Britain is one of diverse cultures, traditions and attitudes. It is also a country with an expanding population (ONS, 2015, p.1), a significant dearth between rich and poor, and an economy slowly recovering from what was for many, a crippling recession. Considering the significant changes in the cultural landscape of Britain over the last few decades, the education system is for many, outmoded, and unfit for the Department for Education's stated aim of preparing young people to thrive in modern Britain. Attacks on the education system have come from, among others, the Confederation of British Industry, whose director-general complained in 2012 of '35 years of piecemeal reforms' failing students (Huffington Post, 2012) and Eric Schmidt, chairman of Google (Robinson, 2011). The problem with treating education like a consumer service, David Priestland (2013) wrote, is that, 'Unlike a haircut, [their] quality is not simply an issue of personal taste, and the consequences for the individual and broader society will not grow out in six weeks'. A character education delivered in schools should not, therefore, simply cater to particular 'tastes', or values, should focus on serving and preparing the student in the first instance for a ruthless and competitive job economy, as well as life in pluralistic society.

Schools Minister Nick Gibb, spoke out in favour of character education in schools in an Education Reform Summit in July 2015, saying: 'education is [also] about the practical business of ensuring that young people receive the preparation they need to secure a good job and a fulfilling career, and have the resilience and moral character to overcome challenges and succeed.' In a 2014 Policy Exchange debate on the argument 'Teaching character education in schools is a waste of time', author and co-founder of the West London Free School, Toby Young offered a different perspective, challenging Dr Anthony Seldon, Master of the independent school Wellington College and James O'Shaughnessy, Managing Director of Floreat Education to argue that, although he was not against the cultivation of good character in young people outside of the school curriculum, and that educational programmes to instil good character are not detrimental in themselves, they have not been proven to be lastingly effective. More critical, Young argues, is for schools to focus on the practical skills to secure a good job and a career, and it is basics such as handwriting that require urgent attention before schools should direct their limited time towards moral character education (Young, 2014). Seldon, in a public lecture delivered primarily towards Michael Gove and Michael Wilshaw (then-Secretary of State for Education and Chief Inspector of Schools in England, respectively) in 2013, argued precisely the opposite, championing character education over exam results (although his charge, Wellington College, built on a Britain of empire and Church, ranks highly in terms of academic success), because 'academic attainment and exam success can never be more than part of the story of the profound moral responsibility of schools to children, parents, society and the nation' (Seldon, 2013, p.2).

Classical character education seeks to cultivate the good characteristics, those that are deemed virtuous, which serve the good of the community and engender positive actions. More than simply *promoting* virtuous behaviour, character education attempts to embed these behaviours, and encourage the development of good habits, not simply one-off actions. Virtues, like character, have their conceptual roots in ancient Greek philosophy, through Aristotle. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle asserts that intellectual virtue must be actively taught, and moral virtues develop through a process he calls 'habituation', whereby the virtues are practised repeatedly: 'we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions' (Aristotle, 1987, 1103b). Habituation, Aristotle believed, should be fostered in children from the earliest possible age. Character education, Berkowitz and Bier (2004) write, 'has long relied upon an Aristotelian principle that character is formed in large part through habitual behaviour that eventually becomes internalized into virtues (character)' (p.80). While character education has its roots in the oldest philosophy of education, and seeks to nurture in students virtues that will undoubtedly support a good job and career, such as fortitude, there is often a *moral* rather than purely *practical* imperative attached to character education, driven by specific – and often – religious values.

Character education, particularly in the USA, has long interested Christian-ethos educators, and many state schools in the USA have utilised character education programmes for many years now driven by such theorists, with initiatives such as the Smart and Good High Schools successfully embedded in schools (see Lickona and Davidson, 2005) and the national Character Education Partnership supporting such initiatives. In the UK the charity 'Character Scotland' carries out and promotes research into character development north of the border, and nationwide the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues based at the University of Birmingham is the leading research centre with projects such as the *Knightly Virtues* curriculum successfully implemented in over 100 schools since 2013 (Arthur et. al., 2014, p.5, p.12). The *Narnian Virtues* project led by the University of Leeds' Mark Pike builds upon this research, delivering a character education curriculum to students aged between 9 and 14 years old, based on literary protagonists of similar age to them (the Pevensie siblings who discover the land of Narnia through the wardrobe in Professor Kirk's mysterious old house, where the siblings have been evacuated to during the Blitz).

Methods of delivering character education vary from initiative to initiative, from whole-school approaches to subject-specific projects such as the *Knightly Virtues* and *Narnian Virtues*, which are based on a wealth of research on the scope presented by literature and the arts to deliver character education curricula through works of fiction. The potential for young people to enter the worlds of the legends, stories and characters of literature and the arts to engage in character education has much scholarly support (see, for example, Bohlin, 2005; Pike, 2014; Carr and Harrison, 2015). There a responsibility, however, if these texts are to be presented as models of virtues, to ensure that young people understand the contexts and values of the texts and their authors. The *Knightly Virtues* project includes an abridged

version of *El Cid*, an example Carr and Harrison assert, of demonstrating respect and tolerance of other races and cultures, and particularly significant, Christian-Muslim relations (2015, p.109). While this is clearly vital now more than ever, *Knightly Virtues* also includes the traditional knightly tale of *Gareth and Lynette*, in which the virtues of Christian faith and courage are exemplified by the legend of King Arthur and his knights' quest for the Holy Grail (Carr and Harrison, 2015, p.75). The western, Christian romanticism of the Holy Grail story is undoubtedly a significant part of British history, but one that potentially subsumes the brutal and far from virtuous reality of the Christian crusades and the bloodshed left in their wake, with a very different the impact on Christian-Muslim relations. Perhaps for this reason, this text is as relevant as *El Cid*. Teaching the *Merchant of Venice* introduces young students to the monumental contribution to the arts of William Shakespeare, yet citing the wisdom of Portia and Nerissa as a virtue must surely be balanced by a recognition of the anti-Judaism accepted at the time, and in no way mitigated by the 'wise' Portia's judgement against 'the Jew' (Shylock is rarely called by his name), and Antonio's 'benevolent' forfeiting of half of the ruined moneylender's wealth (one of the few trades open to Jews in Europe at the time) on the condition that he convert to Christianity. This is hardly a display of Christian tolerance, yet tragically, for the real Shylocks of the time conversion was the one thing that may have saved the lives of their antecedents centuries later. The *Narnian Virtues* project investigated by the University of Leeds' School of Education, similarly, recognises the responsibility in using the work of a famously Christian author – whose bestselling children's' fiction presents the Christian narrative through thinly veiled metaphor – to make the context of the Narnia stories clear to teachers and encourage them to provide scope in the project for various readings of the stories (see Pike et al., 2015). Character education, even through literature, treads a careful line in attempting to teach virtues without teaching values.

A criticism and, proponents would say misconception, of character education is it attempts to simply cultivate good behaviour rather than good character and that it is driven by ulterior agendas. Alfie Kohn, who delivered a scathing critique of the character education movement in 1997, charged that it is 'behaviourist', seeking unquestioning, reward-based compliance and that it is driven by conservative, and religious agendas. I do not intend to further the existing defences of character education against Kohn's claims about *how* character education is delivered here (for example, Glanzer, 1998 and Lickona, 1998); good character education uses pedagogical approaches to character development that have no need of, and indeed actively eschew behaviouristic techniques. I will, however, dwell on Kohn's other concerns: whose values it is possible or legitimate to cultivate in a diverse society.

Kohn (1997) singled out the argument of 'narrow character education' that increasing crime, an indication of society in decline, is due to an undervaluing of virtues. Kohn's point is that character education disregards external political, social and economic factors in influencing people's behaviour (p.4). Character educators often point to the fashionable moral relativism and values clarification of the time for the decline in society since the 1960s and

70s (Lickona, 1996, p.287). Indeed, the statistics about crime, abortion, divorce rates do not lie. It must be borne in mind, however, that several states of the USA were still in the 1960s, in practice if not in law, racially segregated, that racial equality was taking its first faltering steps forward and progress on LGBT rights would take even longer. Legislation on race and sexual equality, abortion and divorce have shifted slowly, and not just in the USA. Lickona rightly observes that the positive element of the 1960s movement was the challenging of racism and sexism that were still so prevalent in society, but asserts that the moral authorities of the school, church and government were delegitimised in the process (Lickona, 1999); responsibility had been trampled under the baby-boomers' stampede for rights. That is not to say that the conservative and religiously motivated character educators Kohn is so critical of nostalgically look back on the days of state sanctioned racism and homophobia, back street abortions and social ostracism for women seeking divorce, as highlights of a more virtuous time of course. It behoves us, however, to recognise that the *virtues* which character educators argue to be in such rapid decline now were often part and parcel of a set of *values* which are altogether more unpalatable: the neighbours people knew so well and cared for were most likely the same race or ethnicity, marriages lasted longer even if they were unhappy and fewer unmarried young women had children, because in both cases the stigma attached to women was often enough to silence them. These are the extreme scenarios, but they are raised to illustrate that they were all products of the values of the moral authorities of their time. Often they were the civil and criminal laws, those that the Department for Education now distinguishes 'British values' as, and they return us to the question of whose values should be taught, when even the so-called moral authorities of church and state have their own reprehensible histories.

### **Whose Values and Virtues? Character Education in Diverse Society**

It would be useful at this point to disentangle values from virtues according to character educators. Lickona, a highly influential character educator, offers the helpful distinction that values are whatever one holds to be important, and we all have them, and unlike virtues, which are universally good and which not everyone has. He goes on to illustrate his point citing a quip that 'Hitler had values, but he didn't have virtues' (Lickona, n.d., p.2), but more on Hitler later. In a diverse society where students come from so many different homes and communities, many teachers 'have found subscribing to any set of values deeply problematic in a pluralistic society' and often 'commit themselves to nothing in particular – or to a sort of undefined humanism where the only question is one of personal feeling' (Arthur, 2005, p.49). Kohlberg (1984), who conceptualised the hugely influential stages of moral development in the moral relativism-era of the late 1960s and 1970s, was sceptical of simply teaching a 'bag of virtues' that focused only on morality and not on stages of moral understanding. Character educators argue that by making the distinction between values and virtues clear, and by focusing specifically on virtues with universal appeal, it is possible



to teach them in diverse schools and societies. In 2004 the American Psychological Association published *Character Strengths and Virtues*, authored and edited by psychologists Peterson and Seligman, who presented a framework of six universal virtues: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Lickona, similarly, identified ten essential virtues: wisdom, justice, fortitude, self-control, love, positive attitude, hard work, integrity, gratitude and humility (Lickona, 2003). The 'core values' character education promotes, according to the Character Education Partnership (2010) 'must meet the classical tests of universality and reversibility'.

There can be little disagreement that all of the virtues that Peters and Seligman and Lickona highlight are, in principle, relevant to students of any faith or none, or any culture or tradition. It is worth reiterating, however, that these basic human virtues are not constructed in social, moral or cultural vacuums, and while nearly all people might agree that fairness and respect, for example, are important and should be taught, the practice of treating others with respect and fairness varies tremendously according to different culturally, religiously and politically-bound values, with gender and the differences of treatment of men and women a prime example in each case. This moral relativism is the issue that character education has challenged, and rejected, since the 1960s and 1970s, but their research has unearthed some unsettling discoveries. Christina Hoff-Sommers (1985), a college lecturer, wrote of trying to find an act that her philosophy students would universally condemn as morally wrong:

Torturing a child, starving someone to death, humiliating an invalid in a nursing home. Their reply is often, "torture, starvation, and humiliation may be bad for you or for me, but who are we to say they are bad for someone else?" (p.164).

Over twenty years later, ethicist and philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain (2008) offered a similar anecdote, recalling when her fifth-grade daughter was taught in her school in New England, 'that values were simply "subjective opinions."' Asking her daughter if slavery was "wrong," her response was, "I think slavery is wrong... but that is just my opinion"' (p.88). 'It is a serious concern', Elshtain continues, that 'in an age of human rights par excellence there are forces at work in our world that undermine the ontological claims of human dignity' (p.91). It is notable here that the terminology between virtue and value begins to slip, demonstrating just how anomalous the language of character education can be. We may share Elshtain's dismay that a five year old child in modern liberal society is encouraged to think of slavery as a morally relativistic issue, yet we must be reminded that it is not so long ago that the moral authorities of church and state did in fact support slavery, and it is a practice which continues around the world today, legitimated by the authorities and values of particular communities and states.

In the UK, the traditional values have their roots in Christianity, and politically, in an ideology of imperialism and colonialism. Although, as Carr and Harrison (2015) observe, the educational system retains only a small reference to Britain's Christian tradition, in the continued mandate for an act of collective worship (not explicitly mandated in the 1944 Education Act to be Christian, but one which is implicitly so), they identify that 'for many, it has seemed culturally imperialist – just a further perpetration of western European colonial injustice – to impose teaching of or about the Christian religion in schools in which the majority of pupils may be Muslims or Hindus' (p.52).

The provision for, and growing number of free schools in the UK present a contemporary dimension to this debate. These government-funded, yet autonomous schools are not restricted by the national curriculum and can be established by professional, charitable, academic or faith groups. The very identity of the entire free school is based upon a specific value; the West London Free School, for example, is founded on principles of classical liberal education, academic excellence and competitive spirit (WLFS, 2015). With over 350 free schools open (New Schools Network, 2015), ostensibly to meet the needs of the immediate community, they raise the question of how well they ultimately prepare students for life outside of that community, should the student wish to leave and no longer share the values of the community, whether they be religious, or secular. In state schools built on traditionally Christian values, and in religiously-governed free schools oriented to the values of their own specific communities, I would argue it is right and positive to teach about *all* major faiths to *all* students, and the tensions that have arisen between faiths and particularly from extremist factions only emphasises the need for an understanding of world religions. Some caution is due, however, precisely because of these tensions, which may not be tempered by religious identity in schools, but only exacerbated. Carr and Harrison (2015) elaborate further on the delicate question of religious education in pluralistic society when they argue that 'from a moral and/or political (or at least liberal-democratic) viewpoint, it seems that according higher status to one religion over others in contexts of religious or other education – especially in (British or other) multicultural contexts – is no longer tenable' (p.54). The chasm between the values of the many and varied free schools in the UK, faith schools and the majority state institutions, leads me back to the question of what exactly the Department for Education considers British values to be, and my consideration of *what* values it is legitimate to teach, and *why* we should teach them.

### **Never Again: The Moral Imperative**

Since the 1940s and the overhauling of the British education system, we have witnessed the most extreme political, social and religious ideologies, and where they can lead. In 1933 the Nazi party were democratically elected to power in Germany; meanwhile in the pre- and Second World War years, oppressive Fascist regimes were the state authorities in Spain and Italy (supported to no small extent by the Catholic Church in both cases) and Oswald

Mosley's black-shirted British Union of Fascists were marching the streets of Britain. The full horrific extent of the Nazis' campaign against the Jews, Roma and Sinti, and other so-called 'undesirables' was revealed in 1945 with the liberation of the concentration and extermination camps, in many cases by American soldiers, members of a still racially segregated army, to international condemnation and a now well-worn dictum of 'never again'.

In 1948, in response to the Second World War the United Nations (formed in 1945) promulgated the Declaration of Human Rights. The declaration announced in its preamble:

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people. Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law (United Nations, 1948)

It goes on to list 30 articles, including article 2: 'Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status', and others, prohibiting slavery, torture, cruel and degrading treatment (United Nations, 1948) The same year, South Africa, who abstained from the United Nations vote on the Declaration of Human Rights, legislated its racial policy on Apartheid. For over forty years the authority of the South African state, forged out of the west's colonisation of Africa, and bolstered by the silence of - and in the case of the Dutch Reformed Church, theological justification offered by - factions of the Christian church (although not, of course, the black Anglican congregation led by such firebrand activists as Desmond Tutu, Secretary-General of the South African Council of Churches), oppressed, persecuted and murdered black South Africans. As the Apartheid regime was beginning to crumble, and eventually gave way to Nelson Mandela's landslide victory for the African National Congress in the first racially democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, clashes of ideologies and values led to genocide in Rwanda in 1994, and Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1995, televised to an international audience of moral and political authorities, just twenty years ago.

Alfie Kohn, who questioned the legitimacy of character education, in 1997, included in his article the question: 'Do you suppose that if Germany had had character education at the time, it would have encouraged children to fight Nazism or support it?' (Desmond, 1995, in Kohn, 1997, p.6). Although the primary argument in this instance was the behaviourist techniques of the Nazis to elicit compliance, we are well aware of the virtues and 'German values' the Nazi authorities encouraged in schools; this was indeed a particularly insidious form of character education. In differentiating between values and virtues, it has been

argued that Hitler had values but not virtues. I would disagree. It is documented in testimonies from the Nazi era that Hitler and his Nazi followers did have virtues, in specific situations and in relation to specific people – they would not be human if they didn't. Hitler's acts of kindness for those closest to him was documented in the book written by his secretary Traudl Junge, *Until the Final Hour* (Junge, 2004) and Rudolf Höss, Kommandant of Auschwitz was a caring and attentive father of five children, who he raised with diligence, discipline and kindness within the perimeters of the infamous Nazi camp. Hitler, Höss, and those who believed in the Nazi values, were still able to show virtues to those who their racist values tolerated, while committing the most base and depraved acts against those whom Nazism rejected.

The year before Kohn's article appeared in *Phi Delta Kappan*, American scholar Daniel Goldhagen published his doctoral thesis on *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, making the bold – and unsubstantiated – claim that the German identity was inherently anti-Semitic, requiring only a tipping point to resort as a nation to unbridled mass murder (Goldhagen, 1996). What Goldhagen, presumably deliberately, glossed over, were the numerous ordinary people who showed immense courage and fortitude to resist the Nazis propaganda, to show solidarity with support their Jewish neighbours and friends and to risk their own lives to save others. Those people embody those virtues that current character education would call universal and seeks to cultivate, which leads to the compelling question of what it is that prompts a person to behave virtuously even in the face of personal danger, and can the spirit to perform virtues, not just learn them, actually be taught?

Samuel Oliner, a Holocaust survivor, undertook a major study with his wife Pearl, interviewing 700 rescuers of Jewish victims of Nazism, investigating *The Altruistic Personality*. Oliner and Oliner's (1988) research revealed that the rescuers' upbringing was significant, to an extent; they had been imbued with pro-social values of tolerance, caring and responsibility by their parents. The 700 rescuers were not, however, alone in being brought up with a knowledge and sense of these values; many more people who *in principal* had these virtues, and shared these values, did not intervene to save the lives of others. Therefore, while being inculcated with pro-social values prompted many to social action under the most extreme circumstances, altruistic behaviour and the courage to display virtues in action cannot alone be attributed to upbringing and education. In his defence of the debate question 'teaching character education in schools is a waste of time', Young (2014) asserted that virtues are personality traits that are inherited or biologically determined, and although encouraging good character is not a detrimental effort, it is not possible to make a person, through education, habitually virtuous if they are not biologically disposed in the first place. Presumably Goldhagen would argue the same point, that the ordinary Germans he so vigorously vilified (and in Goldhagen's work, 'ordinary Germans' is as ambiguous a term as virtues and values have proved to be in character education) were disposed to be anti-Semitic regardless of whether it was taught or not.

The last twelve months alone have demonstrated that, despite the enthusiasm for teaching good character in schools, there is little clear consensus on how that can be fairly tackled in a society so characterised by diversity. Clearly there is a case to be made for some form of character education: while we are not in the midst of a war akin to the Second World War or living under a fascist regime, extremist rhetoric, political, religious and radically anti-religious, pervades the environment young people are growing up in, and it is especially prevalent on social media, the Internet and perpetuated by the global news media. Historic and current authorities of state and religion have their part to play in the ongoing clash of values today. British history, in all its moments of glory and shame, is precisely what has contributed to the wealth of cultural, ethnic and religious values that make up present society. If the Department of Education wishes to instil British values into its next generation of young people, while celebrating diversity, it must first grapple with what exactly it believes British values to be.

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