

Character Flaws – An Anarchist Critique of Character Education in England’s Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT

Taking seriously the anarchist view that there may be something deeply wrong at the very heart of any state-run educational structure designed chiefly to meet the needs of an intrinsically problematic capitalist economic system, this article intends to highlight both the tension within the new Ofsted Inspection Framework for English secondary schools for anyone concerned with *authentic* human flourishing and virtuous character, and also the role such legislation plays in inhibiting and undermining any radical potential for genuine character education within such settings.

Keywords: *Anarchism, education, character, teachers, virtue*

The idea that schools should teach ‘character’ alongside more traditional academic subjects is nothing new within either radical or mainstream¹ thought about education.² Indeed, my own motivation when I got into secondary school teaching a decade ago was as much about wanting to contribute to making a better world, by making there be better *people* in it, as it was about sharing my love of philosophy to students. But since former Education Secretary, Nicky Morgan, put character education back on the explicit agenda in the UK in 2014, first by announcing that she intended England to be ‘a “global leader” in teaching character, resilience and grit to pupils’,³ then by establishing a ‘character education grant fund’⁴ to financially support school projects focused on character, the notion has picked up considerable momentum in England, where I teach.

Building on the international phenomenon of polemics like Angela Duckworth’s 2016 book, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, and Morgan’s own 2017 book on character education, *Taught Not Caught*, the most recent Ofsted Inspection Framework puts character at the heart of what is being looked at in its definition of ‘outstanding’ education. Schools in England are now judged as much on how much they ‘support learners to develop their character’ and how they prepare ‘learners for life in modern Britain’ by ‘equipping them to be responsible, respectful, active citizens who contribute positively to society’ as they are on their academic results.⁵

To those not working in UK education, the significance and potential impact of this new addition to Ofsted’s Inspection Framework may not be clear. To anarchists especially, already dismissive of *any* government policy because of its inherent illegitimacy the question may also arise why they should concern themselves with these changes. In this essay I hope to address both issues. Taking seriously the anarchist view that there may be something deeply wrong at the very heart of any state-run educational structure designed chiefly to meet the needs of an intrinsically problematic capitalist economic system, I will highlight both the tension within the new Ofsted Inspection Framework for English schools for those of us concerned with *authentic* human flourishing, and also the role such legislation plays in inhibiting and undermining any radical potential for genuine character education within these settings. I will be arguing:

a) While anarchists might have strong reasons to be sympathetic to the idea of ‘virtue ethics’, on which the proposed ‘character education’ is based, any idea of Aristotelian or Neo-Aristotelian ‘character’ advocated by anarchists, and even by the proponents of character education within UK schools, is incompatible with the sort of character such schools are institutionally designed to produce.

Furthermore,

b) The teacher’s crucial function as role model through which character is to be cultivated within such a framework is in inherent tension with the fact that any teacher working within such a system, even radical educators attempting to undermine, liberate or subvert such systems from within, are ultimately subject to dominant professional norms and practices which are in direct opposition to authentic human flourishing, disqualifying professional

teachers who work *successfully* within such environments from being legitimate role models of character.

That schools ought to do more than merely transfer abstract knowledge from one generation to the next (what Paulo Freire criticised as the ‘banking’ concept of education⁶) and play a significant part in the socialisation and induction of young people into adult society, has never been a secret. As Freire highlighted in his own analysis of how education could be used to liberate rather than oppress, alongside the mainstream view that transmission of shared social norms and values in the classroom is a worthy goal, lies reasonable criticism of that exact same goal if there is suspicion about the validity of those norms and values. The classic work of Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis noted that in the economically unequal and socially repressive employment structure of capitalist societies, schooling ‘reproduces and legitimates’ inequality and repression so that ‘through the educational encounter, individuals are induced to accept the degree of powerlessness with which they will be faced as mature workers’.⁷ This view is echoed by anarchist writers like Paul Goodman, who ‘argued that the usefulness of educating the general population had been comprehensively outstripped by economic realities ... Schooling, like work, was essentially designed to prepare learners to become cogs in this cultural machine’.⁸ As far back as Max Stirner lambasting the ‘wheels in the head’ installed by traditional education which keep us chained to psychologically oppressive authoritative ‘spooks’, or Emma Goldman decrying the state-educated child as ‘not a complete, well-rounded, original being’ but rather ‘automatons of flesh and blood’; to, more recently, Robert Haworth’s warning that ‘with the massive international movements to standardize curriculum, commodify knowledge, and privatize public institutions, it is evident that state education has deepened its relationships with capitalism’, anarchists have been wary of the so-called ‘character’ state-led schools are designed to create.⁹ Whether the critiques come from our current century or the last, it is hard to disagree with the conclusion of Justin Mueller that ‘many of the critiques of state school systems offered by anarchist educators are over a century old, yet (unfortunately) sound incredibly contemporary’.¹⁰

It is not that anarchists reject *education*, merely the consequences and intent of a *state-controlled* and *state-planned* education. As Rhiannon Firth and Andrew Robinson have said ‘the institution of the school has its origins in nationalist projects, which explicitly aimed for moulding’,¹¹ and it remains possible that an education *not* designed merely to mould children into a compliant and ideo-

logically indoctrinated workforce would yield other, more desirable, results. As Judith Suissa puts it, anarchists have ‘faith in the emancipatory power of education common to many liberal theories’.¹² Justin Mueller has claimed education to be ‘part of the very practice and prefiguration of the anarchist ideal of creating freer and more critical minds, and more open, cooperative and non-oppressive relationships within society’, and Ron Scapp has argued for anarchist pedagogies to unlock ‘the transformative power of education when embraced as the practice of freedom’.¹³ While many anarchists might agree with Stirner’s proclamation that, under current mainstream educational frameworks, flourishing individuals ‘are not supplied by school ... they are there in spite of school’, or Ivan Illich’s observation that ‘people who submit to the standard of others for the measure of their own personal growth soon apply the same ruler to themselves’ and ‘no longer have to be put in their place, but put themselves into their assigned slots’, most would equally concur with Sarah Amsler’s recognition that radical educators can ‘combine a discourse of critique and resistance with a discourse of possibility and hope’.¹⁴ Amsler’s optimism goes further: ‘the school or university classroom will always have the potential to become a place for engagement and surprise’, she says, and ‘contribute to the liberation of human flourishing, co-operative action, and autonomous living’ once we acknowledge that ‘daring to act, even in situations that do not feel emancipatory, can open up revolutionary possibilities’.¹⁵ While Illich might be right that ‘school is the advertising agency which makes you believe that you need the society as it is’,¹⁶ even his call to ‘de-school’ society is not a call to abolish *education*, but rather to liberate it from corrupting institutions. As Giroux puts it: ‘what separates an authoritarian from an emancipatory notion of education is whether or not education encourages and enables students to deepen their commitments to social justice, equality and individual and social autonomy, while at the same time expanding their capacities to assume public responsibility and actively participate in the very process of governing’.¹⁷ Some situationist thinkers, however, drawing on the empirical insights of experimental psychology, have dismissed the very idea of there being persistent notions of ‘character’ which can be meaningfully taught.¹⁸ They have suggested that, ‘to the extent that we are interested in improving the lot of mankind it is better to put less emphasis on moral education and on building character and more emphasis on trying to arrange social institutions so that human beings are not placed in situations in which they will act badly’.¹⁹ But whether we accept the predominant language of virtue and character used by Ofsted and within this paper, or the situationist’s language of

facilitating higher probabilities of desired behaviours across diverse situations, it remains clear, and has been advocated by radical educators, that education can be used explicitly for contributing to the development of a better set of *outcomes* in individual behaviour, and the internal motivations which drive those behaviours, than those currently created under the dominant mainstream model of schooling. 'The school', in the words of Suissa, 'for anarchist educators, is seen primarily as a microcosm of one of the many possible forms of anarchist society; an experiment in non-hierarchical, communal forms of human interaction where, crucially, alongside a rigorous critique of existing capitalist society, the interpersonal relationships which constitute educational interaction are based on the normative role assigned to the human qualities of benevolence, mutual aid and social cooperation'.²⁰ Much has been written by anarchists about the possibilities both within and without the classroom for pedagogies of liberation, of prefiguration, of revolution and of *character*, so perhaps, despite the situationist critique, the new Ofsted emphasis on character in English classrooms over what Andrew Wilkins has described as neoliberalism's 'standardised testing regimes, data-driven audit cultures, and comparative-competitive frameworks'²¹ ought to be welcomed by anarchist teachers like myself, rather than dismissed?

It would depend, of course, on the sort of *character* being aimed for, and the likelihood that Ofsted guidance requires schools to find the explicitly non-coercive and non-hierarchical methods of instilling it which prefigurative anarchist practice requires. In the new Ofsted Framework, the DfE defines character as 'a set of positive personal traits, dispositions and virtues that informs [student] motivation and guides their conduct so that they reflect wisely, learn eagerly, behave with integrity and cooperate consistently well with others'.²² Schools can now only achieve Ofsted's coveted 'outstanding' grade if 'the way the school goes about developing pupils' character is exemplary and is worthy of being shared with others'. To help schools achieve this status, the government has released non-statutory guidance defining character as 'a complex concept with a number of overlapping facets', broken down into four main areas, with one core facet being the 'habituation' of 'positive moral attributes' or 'virtues' such as 'courage, honesty, generosity, integrity, humility and a sense of justice'.²³ The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham, a leading advocate for character education in UK schools, has developed an even more comprehensive set of these moral virtues, based on the ethics of Aristotle, which they believe ought to be actively taught to young people.²⁴ Split across four distinct but interconnected domains (Intellectual, Moral, Civic,

and Performance Virtues) and overseen by the integrating practical wisdom of *phronesis*, the cultivation of a set of virtues such as gratitude, curiosity, critical thinking, autonomy, teamwork and community awareness, they argue, ought to be part of a ‘deliberate and planned for pedagogy’ at the centre of the ‘intrinsically moral’ enterprise of teaching.²⁵ Furthermore, with ‘the teacher-student relationship’ being ‘an inherently moral one’ due to ‘what they model in practice as ethical exemplars’, the Centre argues that ‘the qualities of the would-be teacher are worthy of careful consideration’ when training and hiring new teachers. Traditional ‘subject competence’, they claim, should be ‘supplemented by practical wisdom and good character.’²⁶

That the sort of ‘character’ both Ofsted and the Jubilee Centre are asking schools to work towards is one based on the very same idea of Aristotelian, or Neo-Aristotelian, Virtue Ethics advocated by communitarian thinker, Alasdair MacIntyre and further developed by anarchists like Benjamin Franks and Matthew Adams²⁷ is perhaps a promising sign. Franks has argued that ‘virtues are more consistent with anti-hierarchical activities and contest conservative relations’ while mapping ‘neatly with anarchism because the concept of prefiguration’ seems built into virtue theory’s non-prioritisation of extrinsic over intrinsic value. This focus on concrete ‘practices ... enacted in the here-and-now as well as foreshadowing desirable future conditions, without providing a universal blueprint’²⁸ rather than strict deontological rules or rigid adherence to pre-affirmed consequences has the potential to be deeply anarchistic. Maybe decades of persistent resistance to mainstream classroom culture by radical teachers on the margins of British education has finally seeped through and we are now seeing the green shoots of a radical revolution in English teaching?

To understand why I would dismiss such optimism, we must first be clear about who Ofsted are and why the role they play in England’s schools make them unlikely agents of anarcho-liberation. Ofsted was introduced by the UK government in 1992 as a non-ministerial department with the remit of overseeing the standard of education being delivered across England.²⁹ Ofsted lay out a framework of standards expected to be provided by a school and then go out to schools to see if they meet those standards. Currently, Ofsted is responsible for inspecting all maintained mainstream schools, academies, pupil referral units, alternative provision academies, special schools and special academies, boarding and residential provision in some independent schools, and several non-boarding independent schools in England. Since their first set of inspections began in the early 1990s, the impact of Ofsted on the way that schools are run has been

clear. A 1999 study by the National Foundation for Educational Research and National Union of Teachers showed after the earliest years of Ofsted's existence 'some aspects of school life ... seemed to have deteriorated substantially since inspection', most notably 'in relation to staff morale'.³⁰ Another study from that year spoke of 'post Ofsted blues'³¹ for up to a year after a visit from the inspectors. Fearing a negative inspection and a downgrading from 'outstanding' or 'good' grades to any version of 'inadequate', including the dreaded 'special measures', good school leadership became equated with successfully jumping through whatever new hoops were laid out by Ofsted's frameworks, with some careers ended by negative inspection.³² Little has changed in the twenty years since, with Ofsted's own 2019 research³³ painting a grim picture of teacher wellbeing in England, with 'levels of satisfaction with life ... higher among the general public than among staff in schools' and Ofsted themselves noting teachers 'felt Ofsted inspections were a source of stress' due to a 'culture of what Ofsted wants' interfering in their day-to-day work. The 2019 survey came after several years of Ofsted being forced to run a series of 'myth-busting campaigns'³⁴ in response to the acknowledged power they yield across English schools and the damage being done when their demands are misinterpreted yet still inform school policies. School leaders organise their institutions to meet the standards set by Ofsted, including assessing the effectiveness of their staff's teaching and pay progression by criteria connected to meeting those standards. The initial teacher *training* of those entering the profession does not allow new teachers to get *qualified* unless they meet a set of nationally agreed 'Teacher Standards', set by the DfE and looked for by Ofsted in their inspections.³⁵ The fear of *not* doing what Ofsted have asked for – even if completely misunderstood – has informed the country's definition of good educational practice for decades now. While, theoretically, there is no homogeneity in England's state-run education and it is filled with a diverse range of institutional arrangements free from local authority control, National Curriculum requirements or other state governance, in practice this superficial variety remains limited due to the enduring requirement of meeting Ofsted's expectations. As Andrew Wilkins observes: 'despite their independence from certain local bureaucratic and political structures, school leaders and governors continue to build legitimacy with central government and other regulatory bodies through making themselves answerable as high-reliability organisations or businesses ... strengthening the capacity of the state to intervene in holding others to account, albeit at a distance'.³⁶ Ofsted have been the mechanism through which repeated governments have driven

through significant day-to-day changes in English schools despite their apparent autonomy from central control. As Ofsted reported in 2004, ‘the instrument of regular inspection of educational and childcare provision ... has earned the confidence of government, the general approbation of parents and the respect, if not affection, of many who work in education. Inspection is intrusive, and can trigger responses ranging from a welcome to apprehension, but has gradually become accepted as an established and influential part of the education system’.³⁷ More explicitly: ‘Ofsted has made a strong contribution to the improvement of providers in all sectors, but most notably over the last decade in schools and initial teacher training. The improvement reflects the impact of inspection in conjunction with other major developments in the curriculum, assessment, leadership and management of institutions ... inspection has provided the evaluation, *leverage* and accountability that have helped to embed such initiatives in educational practice’.³⁸

Clearly putting the framing of what constitutes good *character* into this unmistakable apparatus of state compliance has the potential to concern anarchists, even if a theoretical commitment to virtue ethics in the classroom might have our possible support. The importance of prefiguration to anarchist praxis rules out liberation imposed from above. While Franks *does* endorse virtue ethics, it is precisely in relation to this prefiguration that he does so. And though Adams suggests even Bakunin and Kropotkin would agree that ‘only with anarchist civic virtues would anarchy endure’,³⁹ an *anarchist* virtue ethic is not necessarily the same as the version of virtue ethics advocated by Ofsted and the Jubilee Centre. ‘Anarchist virtue theory rejects a single *telos*’ or goal, Franks explains, but ‘does not reject teleology in total. Multiple, changing, interlocking but irreducible *telē*, are part of social practices and the traditions of anarchism in which they are formed’. The goals by which what is to be considered *virtuous* is to be defined, from an *anarchist* perspective, are ‘multiple and irreducible, though porous and adaptable, over time and space ... intrinsic to practices, traditions and narratives’.⁴⁰ They are not a codified checklist for school leaders to tick off and rate for compliance. They are discovered through *doing* and they are discovered *collaboratively*, not imposed from on high, through what MacIntyre calls ‘entering into those relationships which constitute communities whose central bond is a shared vision of and understanding of goods’ and developing within those communities ‘practices’ or ‘coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excel-

lence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended'.⁴¹

There is no doubt that Ofsted's inclusion of virtue-based character education into its inspection framework is to be *imposed* on schools by the state. Acknowledging the role standards set from above have played in setting the agenda for both initial teacher training and the development of experienced teachers in the UK, the Jubilee Centre welcomed Ofsted's new inclusion of character education into its 2019 framework as 'a major turning point for character education in England', *precisely* because 'all of England's 22,000 schools will be asked to explicitly demonstrate how they develop the character of their pupils'.⁴² Since 2015 the Jubilee Centre has been arguing for the need to 'increase the focus on the moral development of teachers in both initial teacher training and continued professional development' and for schools to 'recruit new teachers on their compatibility with a schools' mission and values based ethos', so that the 'significant moral dimension' of teaching stops losing 'ground to competing agendas affecting the profession'.⁴³ That 'insufficient attention has been paid to character during a teacher's Initial Teacher Education (ITE)' was the impetus for the Centre's 2018 research on *Character Perspectives of Student Teachers*, which noted 'a focus on character development within teacher training is both welcomed by student teachers and has the potential to influence their practice', but, again acknowledging the power of Ofsted prior to the new framework, it noted that not only is such character education still missing from many teachers' ITE, 'ultimately, the pressure on teachers to attain measurable outcomes and meet standards' set by Ofsted and the DfE, 'reduces the role to that of a technician, potentially marginalising the effect teachers can have as role models who can influence pupils through their own character and qualities'.⁴⁴

Combined, the Jubilee Centre and Ofsted are arguing that 'in order to be a good teacher, one needs to be, or to become a certain *kind of person*: a person of good character who also exemplifies commitment to the value of what she teaches'.⁴⁵ The view is:

- 1) That character education means purposefully promoting, role-modelling, and nurturing a specific set of virtues in students which will lead to their individual flourishing (eudaimonia) and the overall flourishing of society.
- 2) That these virtues are those same virtues identified by, or extrapolated from, Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*.⁴⁶ Examples of Intellectual

Virtue being things like autonomy, critical thinking, curiosity, judgement and reasoning; examples of Moral Virtues being things like compassion, courage, gratitude, and honesty; examples of Civic Virtues being things like citizenship, civility, community awareness, and service; and examples of Performance Virtues being things like confidence, determination, perseverance and resilience. And that the integrative virtue of *phronesis*, or ‘practical wisdom’, which also needs to be taught and cultivated in schools, is the purposefully developed common sense which allows us to properly apply these various virtues to our lives in the right degree at the right time.⁴⁷

- 3) That teachers are the main mechanism by which this character education is to occur. That teachers, therefore, need to be role models of good character, consciously inculcating character in their students through their own exemplar status in the classroom. That character should be a central element to the training, hiring, and continuing professional development of teachers. That ‘to *have* a virtue is to *be* a certain kind of person with a certain complex mind-set. A virtue is a character trait, a disposition which is well entrenched in a person’ and that ‘only *teachers* can bring to the table the required experience and expertise to turn character education from an academic mind-game to a lived reality for young people’.⁴⁸

For these three claims to be coherent it must be demonstrated that the teachers which statement (3) is dependent upon are capable of instantiating the virtuous character described by statement (2), or else the goal of achieving (1) is impossible. For an *anarchist* educator to endorse it, it must further be demonstrated that the virtues identified by Ofsted and the Jubilee Centre, and this method of developing them, are consistent with an anarchist reading of virtue ethics as a non-hierarchical prefigurative practice. It is my contention that within the current secondary education system in England, the virtues (2) required by teachers (3) to achieve (1) are not only incompatible with the expectations and behaviours inherent to, and cultivated by, the *institutional* norms of the teaching profession and the demands of the contemporary, state-designed, capitalist classroom, but also that this approach to ‘top down’ character education is not fit for purpose from an anarchist point of view.

It is important to note that the attack on the character of professional teachers here is entirely based on the conceptualisation of ‘character’ in the Aristotelian sense, with teachers allegedly held as role models in this regard, and

it is made within the context of an anarchist critique of the illegitimate state structures which control and influence our system of education. It is by no means meant as a *personal* attack on the everyday character of teachers. There is a lot about the character of teaching professionals that is to be admired based on our everyday understanding of character. Teachers, it can be argued:

- Have chosen a largely selfless profession. Low paid and long hours of work aimed at helping hundreds of others year after year. They embody the virtue of public service and selflessness, giving up countless weekends and evenings to ensure the next generation have the best possible start in life.
- Have to be empathetic and patient to work with young people and help them through the long-term and complicated process of navigating new bodies of knowledge and different examination demands. They have to show compassion, understanding, and be able to respond to the different individual needs of hundreds of very different people each year going through not only intellectual, but physical and psychological changes and growth.
- Are adaptive and quick thinking. The classroom is a largely improvised performance in which a teacher has to respond to completely different circumstances each lesson and ensure that, whatever happens in that period, everyone gets the same chance at learning.
- Are highly educated. To be able to teach others, you have to develop your own knowledge-base and understand it in sufficient detail to break it down and explain it to others who don't yet have that knowledge.
- Have perseverance. Teachers can't just give up. Their worst students and worst classes still must be given the same opportunities as their best.

The list is not exhaustive, but it does suggest that teachers have many positive character attributes which are indeed exemplary, and that they have something important to offer the young people in their care. However, there is also a negative side to the character of teachers working within this system which points to the problem of having any state-appointed system of *character education* put in place. To paint with a broad brush, those teachers working in compliance with the current education system are, by definition, the sort of people who have at least conceded that *either* the current education system is actually fit for purpose and a worthwhile endeavour in which to use their considerable talents, *or* that its negative features are something they have little choice but to submit to in order to earn a living (remember – being able to meet those Ofsted

criteria and the *Teacher Standards* laid out by the Department for Education as ‘the minimum level of practice expected of trainees and teachers from the point of being awarded qualified teacher status’⁴⁹ is increasingly important for job security). It therefore entails that such teachers are the sort of people:

- i. Willing to promote the idea that ‘education’ ought to be centred around examination success and qualifications designed mainly to differentiate for the workplace, rather than the intrinsically valuable pursuit of, or exploration of, knowledge (Teacher Standard 2, 3, 6, and 8).⁵⁰
- ii. Largely accepting of perpetuating unquestioning authority structures, where young people are trained to do what a teacher says simply because a teacher has said it and are sanctioned for asking questions and ‘talking back’ (Teacher Standard 7 and 8).
- iii. Largely accepting of wielding punitive punishments for minor offences and contributing to the continuation of a culture of fear and reward, where compliance is the ultimate lesson (Teacher Standard 7 and 8).
- iv. Willing to police arbitrary and unnecessary uniform policies which remove students’ ability for self-expression and identity, and further enforce blind compliance to conservative social norms (Teacher Standard 7 and 8).
- v. Accepting of perpetuating divisive ‘us vs them’ mentalities through uniform colours, house systems, sports representation and other uses of intra-school and inter-school competition as incentive rather than focusing on the things which bring people together. Teaching school pride, house pride, sports team pride is effectively to teach hostility towards those deemed ‘other’. Teachers have to be ok with this to work successfully within modern educational institutions. At the very least they have to pit their own students against each other in a bid for the highest grades, university places and careers (Teacher Standard 1, 7, and 8).
- vi. Accept exploitation and over-work as the natural order of things. While teachers’ decision to work in a low paid public service for the greater good is to be admired, it has also been massively exploited by governments and school leaders squeezing as much teaching out of them, as much marking, as many extra-curricular activities, and as much ‘accountability’ paperwork as possible. All of which means, as suggested in the virtue of selflessness mentioned earlier, teachers give up their free-time

as matter of course, losing many weeknights and weekends to their job. However, much of this weekend and evening work is irrelevant to the actual education of a child and is more about providing ‘evidence’ to the hierarchies of accountability (such as Ofsted) that such education is being done. The ‘normalisation’ of such exploitation is then transferred onto students, whose free-time is similarly stolen with equally unnecessary homework tasks, instilling the exploitative message that the cultural norm is that work should take up the bulk of their free time. A message which makes it capable for exploitation and loss of freedom to become a standard feature of all employment (Teacher Standard 4, 5, 6, and 8).

- vii. Participate in many questionable social norms and replicate them in the classroom, from deference to government, monarchy, religious ritual and observance, to the normalisation of embedded sexism, racism, colonialism, homophobia, transphobia, and damaging views on drugs and alcohol within longstanding yet dated curricula (i.e. History, Religious Education, PSHE) and traditions. ‘Mainstream’ schools, by their nature, are inherently conservative institutions, where having a hairstyle which is considered too long or too short could become a major behavioural incident and where asking to go to the toilet at the ‘wrong’ time may be considered insolent (Teacher Standard 3, 7 and 8 / Personal and Professional Conduct).
- viii. Facilitate the out-sourcing of key aspects of social welfare and act as an enabler of the deficiencies of our flawed political and economic system. Schools are used as an ‘off the books’ mechanism for parenting, feeding, housing, and protecting vulnerable children, as well as creating a façade of meritocracy in eventual life outcomes, which acts as effective propaganda to enable a broken state-system to mask its many failings (Teacher Standard 8).

Such claims require further substantiation. I shall start with claim (i):

Up until COVID-19 required the apparent cancellation of all 2020 and 2021 GCSE and A-level exams, the UK education system has primarily been about exam success, with standardised assessment tests (SATs) taken in Year 2 and Year 6 of English primary schools (as well as a numeracy exam in Year 4),⁵¹ GCSEs taken at the end of Year 11, A-levels at the end of Year 13,⁵² and any number of tests in between. The bulk of school reporting to parents is based

on target grades and current grades, even in years where no exams are being taken as schools prepare pupils for future exams and speak of ‘progress’ in terms of numerical or lettered attainment.⁵³ Ofsted will always use an ‘inspection data summary report’⁵⁴ of the school they are looking at (containing data on number of qualifications entered, Progress/Attainment 8 scores, EBACC information, etc.) as the springboard for their investigations (with long-term declines in examination results also acting as a trigger for inspection). Despite a lot of work being done by unions, parents, teachers and even Ofsted itself to try and make English education about more than examination results, they remain the banner headline and ultimate goal of all UK schools. The media reports the smiling faces of students receiving high grades and potential tears of those who fail every year.⁵⁵ They do not report on the broad day-to-day curriculum of our children’s schools, or the everyday successes and failures of the classrooms. Nor do universities or employers ask about the ideas explored, or interests stimulated, between exams until they have first separated applicants based on their terminal grades. With social pressure in a declining economy to ensure children leaving the education system have all the tools to be employable, it is understandable that schools therefore focus on their exam results above all else; removing certain subjects from the curriculum where their data is not valued, as happened with the introduction of the EBACC in 2010;⁵⁶ and eating into the time of non-examination years such as Key Stage 3⁵⁷ to prepare students for the high-stakes exams of Key Stage 4 and 5. Though most schools try to do their bit at promoting ‘enrichment’ or non-examination studies alongside the qualification curriculum, and the 2019 Ofsted Framework has made this central to the new inspection agenda too, the fact remains that, *culturally*, the UK education system still places a fundamental importance on terminal examination results which makes ‘teaching to the test’ a central element of what it means to be a teacher. With limited timetabling, demanding exam specifications, and an accountability framework which remains firmly data-driven, for most teachers the idea of teaching based on *the value of subjects in their own right* is a fantastical dream rather than a lived reality. Even when Education Secretary Gavin Williamson declared exams ‘cancelled’ due to the coronavirus pandemic, in reality this merely meant outsourcing examination from the exam boards to individual schools. Teachers were tasked with determining final grades using a range of internal assessments which basically amounted to exams through the backdoor. A process which was prioritised over the actual education of exam-age students, who returned to schools after

months of lockdown only to sit test after test so that data could be harvested instead of learning anything new.⁵⁸

Claims (ii), (iii), and (iv) are, likewise, entrenched in the everyday norms of the classroom. Teachers in the UK are expected to ‘manage behaviour effectively’, using ‘clear rules and routines for behaviour’ based ‘in accordance with’ the behaviour policy of whatever school a teacher is working in, and which every school is obliged to have.⁵⁹ Teachers are required to ‘establish a framework for discipline with a range of strategies ... exercise appropriate authority, and act decisively when necessary’.⁶⁰ More information about what such authority and decisive action might look like comes from the government’s guidance document, *Behaviour and Discipline in Schools 2016*, which reminds the profession that ‘teachers have power to discipline pupils for misbehaviour which occurs in school and, in some circumstances, outside of school’ including the powers to ‘discipline pupils at any time the pupil is in school or elsewhere under the charge of a teacher’, to ‘impose detention outside school hours ... during lunch-time, after school and at weekends’ and ‘confiscate pupils’ property’, amongst any number of ‘clear sanctions for those who do not comply with the school’s behaviour policy’, such as ‘a verbal reprimand ... extra work or repeating unsatisfactory work ... the setting of written tasks as punishments, such as writing lines or an essay ... missing break time ... school based community service or imposition of a task ... regular reporting including early morning reporting ... scheduled uniform and other behaviour checks’ and, of course ‘in more extreme cases ... temporary or permanent exclusion’. Teachers even have the legal right to ‘use reasonable force ... to maintain good order and discipline in the classroom’.⁶¹ Meanwhile, schools have the right to ‘discipline your child for not wearing the school uniform’, warning parents that their ‘child can be suspended or expelled if they repeatedly ignore the uniform rules’.⁶² A teacher, working in one of the vast majority of schools in the UK enforcing some form of uniform policy, is therefore a person comfortable with enforcing largely arbitrary clothing norms on young people through threat of punishment. This links to claim (v): the ‘othering’ of those not on your ‘team’, be their fellow students not wearing the right uniform, fellow students placed in a different competitive house or form for school sporting events, students from other schools wearing different uniforms to you and competing on rival teams for inter-school trophies, or fellow students who *are* wearing the right uniform but in the *wrong* (culturally transgressive) way. When teachers set such high stock in the colour of a tie, the length of a skirt, the crease

in a trouser or the style of one’s hair, they send out a variety of appalling messages to young people, from what they wear and following orders being more important than their education, to the notion that good people are the ones who look the same as you.⁶³

Problematizing these accepted professional expectations of day-to-day school life – exams, behaviour management, uniform, competition – makes clear that these are not value-neutral and uncontroversial norms. Returning to Aristotle, and the Jubilee Centre’s, list of virtues teachers should be exemplifying, is it *courageous* to show students how *not* to stand out in a crowd and how to sublimate their personalities to conformity within a group? Do teachers embody *humility* as they demand obedience in their classrooms? Is it demonstrating the virtue of *autonomy* or *critical thought* to demand, through threat of sanction, compliance with all instructions and to rigidly follow the caprice of arbitrary exam specifications as the foundational basis for most educational schemes of work? Does it bring *justice* to continue to facilitate, year after year, a terminal examination system intentionally designed to rank students from better to worse in order to limit the opportunities of some whilst favouring others for an inherently unjust job market within a country marred by significant economic injustice?⁶⁴

Claim (vi) speaks further to the lack of courage shown by teachers as matter of course: the institutional acceptance within the teaching profession of poor work/life balance and exploitation. The Department for Education’s 2016 survey of teachers revealed British teachers to be working on average 54.4 hours a week, with school leaders working 60 hour weeks, far beyond the supposed 48 hour ‘maximum weekly working hours’ the government claims ‘you can’t work more than’.⁶⁵ A quarter of full-time teachers and a third of part-time teachers reported that 40% of those 54-60 hour weeks were hours worked at home during evenings and weekends. ‘Perceptions of performance evaluation by management’ were a significant cause of these long working hours, with only 40% of the total working hours actually spent *teaching*. Teachers, scared of being disciplined by their management teams (management teams themselves made up of teachers scared of being reprimanded by their own managers, governors, or Ofsted) sacrifice their own wellbeing and time with friends and family to do piles of unnecessary work in the hope it will keep them out of trouble. Much of that unnecessary work has been codified and legitimised within school policies on assessment, recording and reporting, and thereby normalised within the school environment. Far from being virtuous role models, these vice-riddled educa-

tors pass on their unhealthy habits to the young people in their care, setting homework for the sake of fulfilling homework policies, expecting ongoing revision in students' free time as they prepare for high stakes linear examination of two years' worth of learning. On top of the previously cited survey by Ofsted on teacher wellbeing, the National Education Union's 2018 survey of teachers revealed 81% of teachers responding had considered leaving the profession in the previous twelve months due to workload pressures and that more than 80% were now teaching *more* than the average teaching hours reported in the DfE survey in 2016, with 40% spending more than 21 hours a week working evenings and weekends.⁶⁶ While it is positive that in England the teaching profession remains so strongly unionised, the truly courageous in education seem to be those *leaving* the teaching profession due to the excessive workload they have experienced. As David Foster reported: 'Around 42,000 full-time equivalent qualified teachers left the state-funded sector in the 12 months to November 2018' and '32.3% of newly qualified entrants in 2016 were not recorded as working in the state sector five years later'.⁶⁷ Once liberated from the classroom, however, these true role models of courage are no longer available at schools to be the educators of *character* which Ofsted and the Jubilee Centre are looking for.

Through the above examples there is already some evidence to support claim (vii). Adding to the norms of exploitation, professional teachers perpetuate authoritarianism, limiting cultural norms of uniform and conformity, the 'othering' of those who don't wear the same colours as you, and a generally impoverished version of education as merely a means to qualifications for the workplace. State-compliant schools, bowing as they must to the edicts of Ofsted and the content specifications of external exam boards, are inherently conservative institutions which become echo-chambers for the norms of the established order.

At this point, perhaps, anarchist readers would object by pointing to the hundreds of ways in which radical teachers can and have undermined the established order from within their classrooms. Stephen Ball and Antonio Olmedo echo James C. Scott's notion of 'hidden transcripts' beneath the 'public transcript ... required of those subject to elaborate and systemic forms of social subordination' revealed 'offstage' and 'under different constraints of power'.⁶⁸ They speak of 'the teacher who stands alone in their classroom or their staff common room and sees something "cracked"' re-framing the school as 'a site of struggle and resistance' where, in 'recognition of the possibilities of power, the fragility of freedom and the limits of contingency and domination' resisting teachers can

seek an, admittedly limited, ‘space within them’⁶⁹ for personal rebellion, enacting Foucauldian micro-resistances to keep themselves sane. Then there is Firth and Robinson’s broader call for ‘consciousness-raising as a specifically anarchist pedagogy’ which they describe as both ‘possible as well as necessary’⁷⁰ in one of many recent books spilling over with page after page of plentiful examples, both actual and theoretical, of ‘holes in the capitalist system where collective efforts are happening in different locales throughout the world. Not only are radical educational experiments emerging’, Haworth tells us, ‘but these efforts actively oppose and denounce the liberal authoritative state that has failed us’.⁷¹

True though it might be that, as Sarah Amsler puts it, ‘educational institutions continue to be viewed as sites of resistance to the very forces that make them into institutions of domination’, we must be realistic: the resistance of anarchist teachers, though inspiring and necessary, has not yet become anywhere near mainstream.⁷² As Franks notes, citing Saul Newman, since the economic crash of 2008 there has been ‘expanding populist nationalist sentiment in the United Kingdom and the United States and elsewhere across the world, manifesting itself in the United Kingdom’s vote to leave the European Union, the election of Donald Trump as 45th President of the United States and the rising and sustained support for nationalist-populist policies either in “anti-system” parties or integrated into governing parties’.⁷³ Much as the odd classroom or even an entire rogue school may operate, on the margins, against the grain of what is expected, there is little evidence, certainly in England, of these minor beacons of liberation becoming anywhere near the norm, or of society turning in a more anarchist direction as a result of their interventions. Darren Webb, for example, notes an inherent tension between the need for a utopian goal for radical education and anarchist reluctance to endorse prescriptive teleology (as seen in Franks’ rejection of such teleology), leaving ‘utopian pedagogy as currently understood ... not up to the task’.⁷⁴ For anarchists, as Suissa puts it, there is the dilemma that ‘either the education in question is to be completely non-coercive and avoid the transmission of any substantive set of values, in which case it is hard to see how such an education could be regarded as furthering the desired social change; or it is to involve the explicit transmission of a substantive curriculum regarding the desired social order – in which case it would appear to undermine the libertarian ideal’.⁷⁵ Even the seeming solution to this dilemma by those who place prefiguration and its stress on ‘the experimental, productive and innovative characteristics of anarchist practices that challenge and seek to replace or challenge hierarchical and oppressive social forms’ at the centre of their anarchist pedagogies, by design,

bring no consensus on what exactly is being prefigured in each individual experiment.⁷⁶ This means the cracks within mainstream education in which radical alternatives are occurring are not yet a significant counter to, or serious threat to, the dominance of Ofsted and its practice-dominating accountability measures. Furthermore, as shown already, to keep one's job within these institutions requires at least some 'public transcript' of compliance with these professional norms. One need only look as far as the Teachers' Standard for 'personal and professional conduct' which warns teachers, by law, against 'undermining fundamental British values, including democracy' and 'the rule of law' as an example of the ideological norms successful teachers in England are professionally required to convey.⁷⁷ The claim that democracy and rule of law must not be undermined, within this context, born out of and in conjunction with a controversial counter-terrorism and extremism strategy, 'Prevent', which defines 'vocal or active opposition' to either as 'extremism' within a legislative system which has long used counter-terrorism laws to infiltrate and silence dissent, intentionally requires teachers to perpetuate two myths.⁷⁸ The first is the myth that this current system which the British state *calls* democracy is, in fact, authentically democratic.⁷⁹ The second is the myth of falsely equating rule of law to the idea that law is sacrosanct despite many great achievements in society coming from direct violation of, and in protest against, *illegitimate* laws. While such rebellion remains compatible with an overall commitment to rule of law when seen as a principled commitment within a society for all people and institutions (including government and leaders) to be subject to, and accountable to, a set of transparent, mutually agreed, and fairly applied laws, this is not the interpretation implied by the architects of the Teacher Standards explicitly seeking to use the requirement as a means to monitor and stamp out political unrest.

The rejection of the state is at the heart of any anarchist critique,⁸⁰ but what is important to see here – especially for supposedly virtuous role models of *critical thought* – is not only how little objection there has been to these imposed ideological obligations from professional teaching bodies and unions, but how the very idea of undermining democracy is *inherent* to the autocratic rule of the professionally-compliant English classroom, where, as per the very same Teacher Standards, the voice of the majority (the students) is habitually and purposefully ignored so that the unelected tyrant (the teacher) can do what they want through fear of punishment. Outside of the rare radical outlier, students have little to no say in the curriculums they are subjected to, to who teaches them, what activities they will be doing in the classroom, which subjects they will be taught, to

how they can spend their breaks and lunchtimes; even how they can spend their own free time at home is frequently dictated by the school. Although, in some cases, the classroom can be a battleground against conservative norms (such as the recent early-years LGBTQ-positive ‘No Outsiders’ PSHE programme pioneered in a Birmingham primary school against opposition from local parents and faith groups), we can’t ignore, in contrast, things like the awful legacy for the LGBTQ community of Section 28, and the many teachers obliged to – and complicit in – upholding this legal ban on acknowledging any non-heterosexual sexuality as part of their professional duty between 1988 and 2003, even at the expense of their own health and wellbeing.⁸¹ Meanwhile the further expectation that teachers ensure ‘personal beliefs are not expressed in ways which exploit pupils’ vulnerability or might lead them to break the law’ is itself an exploitation of pupils’ vulnerability to indoctrinate them from an early age into unthinking acceptance of this counterfeit ‘democracy’ and ideologically useful compliance with ‘rule of law’. As Haworth has put it, schools ‘uphold and reinforce a particular imagination: one that is restricted to thinking about particular political, economic, social, and cultural ideas and practices in society as stagnant ... Our ability to imagine possibilities beyond the confines of market values, especially those thoughts and ideas based in possible futures outside our current practices is minimized or squashed’.⁸²

And so, finally, to claim (viii). As we saw, while schools were kept open long into the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, despite being a daily mass gathering at a time when other mass gatherings had been nationally restricted, and were rushed into reopening again before there was scientific consensus that it was safe to do so, it was not because the country required its children to be *educated* that teachers, students, and their families were put at great risk.

⁸³ The important social function of schools was made clear in its absence: providing food each day for the 1.3 million students eligible to receive free school meals;⁸⁴ shelter and security for the 4.1 million pupils living in poverty or facing otherwise vulnerable domestic situations;⁸⁵ and free childcare for the workers in our economy who would otherwise be unable to go to work. Because the British state has used schools to mask its failings in ensuring all people under its care can afford basic food and shelter, that they are safe and both physically and mentally healthy, and that they can access childcare or financially survive time off from work or the loss of employment, a multitude of welfare failings are exposed when schools are not open. The school’s institutional role in enabling this neglect makes participating teachers, despite their

remarkable role in providing from below what the state fails to provide from above, somewhat morally complicit.⁸⁶

Having therefore demonstrated such a teacher's inherent failure to exemplify key Moral and Intellectual virtues, the anarchist's anti-state position now makes a teacher's potential *success* at being a role model for the remaining Civic and Performance virtues deeply questionable. Consider the Civic virtues of *citizenship* and *service*. Although Adams has argued 'the anarchist tradition has a long history of engaging with concepts of citizenship in which an interpretation of civic virtue plays an essential part',⁸⁷ his emphasis on anarchist interpretation is important. If such citizenship and service means service to, and citizenship of, an illegitimate state then it is hard to see how such habits are virtues which would lead to our flourishing instead of vices which lead to our continued repression within a harmful political and economic order. Do teachers embody the idea of *service* when they demonstrate their continued exploitation by the state to indoctrinate increasing class-sizes of young people for longer and longer hours while compensated with less and less pay? Do they embody the idea of *citizenship* when they organise student council groups which replicate the same problematic structures of authority and hierarchy as the flawed political system they unthinkingly aim to mimic? If so, it is hard to see such embodiment as *virtuous* even if they do tick the box of being Civic.

Likewise, are teachers instilling the Performance virtue of *perseverance* in their students when they stay up all night marking homework and writing reports, only to receive another sixty books to grade the very next day? Are they modelling *resilience* when they go for weeks without rest and still manage to drag themselves into work each day? While it is true, perseverance and resilience are indeed virtues, they are virtues we should only really need when times get hard – a death in the family; unexpected illness; a divorce – or when fighting for something worth fighting for. They shouldn't be the day-to-day virtues our children need just to survive everyday life. Aristotle, when putting forward his original virtue ethics, was only too aware that virtue 'is a mean between two kinds of vice, one of excess and the other of deficiency',⁸⁸ and in the four examples I have shown above of Civic and Performance Virtues it appears that in order to meet the required professional demands of the job, teachers in England, if they are to keep their jobs, are pushed towards deficiencies or excesses rather than a golden mean of these key virtues. An *excess* of resilience and perseverance to the point of exploitation and poor mental and physical wellbeing, and a deficiency of true citizenship and service, serving and promoting citizenship to

the state rather than serving within the shared citizenship of the *society* of people who would be better served by abolishing that state, and its questionable model of exam-based, career-focused education.

As Randall Amster has noted, ‘anarchism entails a clear rejection of the State. Yet this basic premise is complicated by the reality of anarchists overwhelmingly living within states and thus supporting them (either implicitly or explicitly) on myriad levels’.⁸⁹ This article is not intended to undermine the important work of anarchist or other radical teachers across English education in providing important opportunities for resistance against the intended outcomes of the mainstream classroom, or to place excess moral judgement at those teachers’ feet by calling them complicit in indoctrination. As an anarchist teacher myself I am all too aware of the clash between needing to pay the bills and wanting to live a principled and authentic life. It must be made clear that in saying such ‘teachers’ cannot be considered good role models of character I include myself and my own numerous daily compromises in this judgement. By its very nature, as a lynchpin of state organisation and indoctrination, the school environment is an inherently unsuitable place to teach good character if, as the anarchist would argue, the truly virtuous character would be one which transcends and exposes the illegitimate goals of the state, and that these virtues are to be developed mutually and non-hierarchically in shared and organic practices. Although a range of radical educational experiments may give some students brief glimpses of truly virtuous character, to keep one’s job within the English education system demands the necessary embedding of accepted professional norms and customs which, despite the many positive contributions teachers make to society, and opportunities there may be within such systems to subvert from the inside, show evidence, at the very least, of systemic Intellectual and Moral shortfalls in the virtues of autonomy, critical thinking, courage, humility and justice, as well as within the Civic and Performance virtues mentioned above, both from an anarchist perspective and from the perspective of the non-radical virtue ethics on which the new Ofsted framework is based.

Teachers across England may well be doing an admirable job, under incredibly difficult circumstances, and the role of virtue ethics in the development of character may even have some revolutionary potential for anarchist educators, but to work successfully within this system necessarily entangles teachers as either willing or unwilling servants of an illegitimate state, professionally bound to perpetuate too many of the foundational myths of that state, leaving the claim that such teachers can be exemplars of character and character role-models for

our children, or that true character education can come about when imposed from above, a claim which no anarchist educator can justifiably endorse.

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NOTES

- 1 I make the distinction here between ‘mainstream’ thought about education and radical critique of predominant educational theory to highlight what will become throughout the article a distinction between ‘mainstream’ character education and what I shall be calling traditions of character *resistance* education found alongside, but outside, those predominant ‘mainstream’ ideas.
- 2 Arguably what one might call the ‘mainstream’ link between education and character existed (separate from radical, anarchist or other, forms of character *resistance* education as a response to this in the last two hundred years) since, at least, the time of Plato, with *The Republic* placing education clearly in the context of justice; and Rousseau’s classic, *Emile*, grappling with how education might protect a person from corrupting influences long before the German *Bildung* tradition or more modern thinkers like Disraeli and Dewey began to re-examine the idea in the context of the sort of schools we recognise today.
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