

Key annual conferences focused on character education in 2023

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Over the past thirty years, character education has become a major topic of scholarly discussions. Thanks to the combination of several events, namely, establishing the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at Birmingham University, creating the network of centres for character education across European countries, and establishing the European Character and Virtue Association (ECVA), character education has seen a significant increase in popularity in Europe, especially in recent years. Let us share our perspectives and experiences from several major conferences that represent the aforementioned surge of interest in character education.

11th Annual Conference of Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues : *Character and Virtues in Professional Practice* (5–7 January, Oriel College, Oxford University)

In comparison with the usual time-consuming development of scientific infrastructure, we have witnessed an extraordinary success story in the founding and development of an organization that has become, in an incredibly short period of time, without question one of the major leaders in the scientific and practical development of character education in the world. The Jubilee Centre has succeeded in concentrating a remarkable group of scholars and educators who greatly satiate the world's demand for rigorous conceptualization, high-quality theoretical and empirical research, and applied works in the field of neo-Aristotelian character education. This is mirrored in the recurring attendance of key figures in the field and the strong interest of many others to attend the Centre's annual conferences. There were 120 responses to the call for papers from which fifty were selected for presentation.

This year's leading topic was "character and virtues in professional practice," with three very inspirational keynote speakers – Robert McGrath (Virtue is not Easy), David Walker (Owning Professional Practice Through Character), and Sabena Y. Jameel (Is Medicine Still a Noble Profession?). In general, the contributions concluded that the current ethical frameworks articulated by individual professions (social work, medicine, army etc.) are often insufficient to develop professionalism and practical wisdom. In Sabena Y. Jameel's words, to strive to be a "noble profession" (no matter exactly what profession is meant) we need to refocus our attention on character education and developing professional virtues.



Lord James O'Shaughnessy delivering his after-dinner speech during the Jubilee Centre Annual Conference.

The typical feature of this conference is a huge emphasis on dialogue and non-formal possibilities for discussions during dinners and coffee breaks in the picturesque surroundings of Oriel College. Very friendly, supportive, and warm atmosphere prevailed throughout the three days of the conference. Well, it's difficult to act viciously, when Thomas More or Cardinal Newman look at you all the time. During one of such dinners, after eleven years of tough grind at the helm of the Jubilee Centre, prof. James Arthur announced the handing over of the sceptre to his successor, Tom Harrison, who will oversee the leadership for the next few years. Good luck, Tom!

1st Annual Conference of the European Character and Virtue Association (ECVA) : Character and Virtue Education in Europe – Challenges and Opportunities (28–30 June, Madrid, Francisco de Vitoria University)

Established in 2022, ECVA offers a forum for promoting research, training, and networking in the field of character education. The Association is a membership organisation made up of academic networks, practitioner associations, disciplinary groups, and universities. It provides members with unique opportunities to shape European policies and initiatives affecting higher education and research. An annual conference is one of the main methods to fulfil its mission.

The topic of the very first ECVA conference reflected the organization's major (constitutive) aim: to offer an overview of the challenges and opportunities in character and virtues education in Europe. In accordance with this aim, the participants answered several important questions: what are the challenges and opportunities in Europe to help grow in character and virtue education? What initiatives have already been taken in Europe in this area? In what areas should more work be done and what actions should be

taken to bring character and virtue education to the forefront in Europe? What educational practices are being carried out or should be carried out in this regard? How can we do networking to face the challenges and opportunities that character and virtue education present in Europe?



From left: Martin Brestovanský, Romana Martincová, Andrej Rajský, Eva Bačkorová.

More than 80 speakers participated in three days' programme. During keynote addresses, speakers repeatedly mentioned problems and obstacles in getting character education its deserved status in public policies. However, there are some inspirational examples across European countries showing that continual effort, quality research, good public communication and reasoning, and overall preparedness brings success when favourable circumstances come together. Slovak story of the National Curriculum development, described by Andrej Rajský in this volume, is one of such examples.

To support character education development in Europe as well as to consolidate the association, the ECVA members decided to strengthen their concrete collaboration through a joint international comparative research project. The TEPACE project's primary aim, led by Roland Bernhard, Veronica Fernandez, and Tom Harrison, is to evaluate the attitudes towards character education among parents and teachers in 13 European countries. At this moment, the project is in the phase of gathering data, with more than 20.000 respondents announced.

7th Annual Conference of Aretai Center on Virtues : *Phronesis, Virtues and Meta-Virtues* (20–22 September, University of Genoa, Genoa, Italy)



Very broadly, a meta-virtue could be defined as an ethical, epistemic, or civic higher-order virtue that has a special status with respect to character in general, or to character in some applied fields in particular. As the organisers stated, the purpose of this conference was to investigate the status of meta-virtues and identify potential meta-virtues alternative to phronesis as this virtue is usually indicated as a prime candidate for Master virtue in current particularly promising research.

Aretai – Center on Virtues is an interdisciplinary research centre that gathers scholars from several Italian universities and establishes research collaborations and partnerships with international research centres or institutes, such as the *Jubilee Center for Character and Virtues*¹ at University of Birmingham. As they themselves point out, they were the first centre on virtues in continental Europe (until ECVA was founded last year). The Centre is based at the Department of Antiquities, Philosophy and History of the University of Genoa, and the closest “ally” of the University of Genoa in terms of the Centre’s activities is the European University of Rome (as is evident from the venues where the 6 previous annual conferences were held).

The research and conferences of the Aretai Centre have a strong philosophical stamp, but they also actively contribute to the fields of psychology, social sciences and education.

It was evident that the 7th edition of the annual conferences builds on a wealth of previous research and networking experience with similarly oriented institutions and authors around the world. The choice of keynote speakers confirms this fact: Kristján Kristjánsson (Jubilee Center for Character and Virtues, University of Birmingham), Glen Pettigrove (University of Glasgow) – Chiara Palazzolo (University of Tulsa, USA), Patrick L. Plaisance (Donald P. Belisario College of Communication, Penn State University) and representative of the home ground Maria Silvia Vaccarezza (Aretai Center on Virtues, University of Genoa). In total, there were 35 presentations, which were conveniently spread over generous time slots, and that the organisers created space for discussions of a high quality. As defined by the topic of the conference, the main question was whether phronesis, practical wisdom, is the main and inherent virtue without which there is no other virtue or virtuous life, or it shares this role with some other, equally important meta-virtue.

¹ <http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/>

Two researchers from the Trnava team, Andrej Rajský and Marek Wiesenganger, spoke at the conference. In their presentations (1. *Phronetic friendship and philiatric wisdom. Reinterpreting philia as meta-virtue.* 2. *Phronesis is not enough: do we need one rational meta-virtue?*), they sought to argue for the thesis that, besides phronesis, philia, that is, friendly (pro-social, benevolent, and good-acting) love, is such a main co-virtue. They supported this thesis with references to classical Aristotelian sources and to contemporary educational experience.

The 8th Annual Conference entitled *Ethos and virtue: theoretical and practical perspectives* will take place in Bari (Southern Italy), 25–27 September 2024.

49th Annual Conference of Association for Moral Education (AME) : Positive Youth Development and Moral Education : Building Bridges (25–28 October, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX, USA)



A long history (established in 1976), strong networks (having members from 35 countries), a wealth of research (with leading *Journal of Moral Education*), and an always vital dialogue and resource production make AME undoubtedly one of the most important organizations in the world when it comes to moral and character education. Given its mission to provide a space for broad discussion, the organization has no ambition to create and promote one consistent conceptualization of moral/character education. As Marvin Berkowitz says, “We are like-minded internationally-based scholars and practitioners brought together by our interests in the topic of moral education, *however we define that.*” There are certainly advantages and disadvantages to such an approach, but it is unquestionably good that such a wide space exists. The thematic focus of this year’s conference also represents this approach very well.

The two fields mentioned in the conference title share key similarities in overarching constructs and approaches, but at the same time, they have often remained separate in terms of scholarship and practice. That’s why it was one of the most anticipated symposia that brought together key persons in the topic – Richard Lerner, Jaqueline Lerner, Kendall Cotton Bronk, and Pamela King, with Marvin Berkowitz and Larry Nucci, who offered fruitful discussant reviews of their contributions.

From my (of course, very subjective) point of view, there were also other very inspirational performances: Judith Smetana’s contribution on adolescents’ moral autonomy development; Hyemin Han’s research reports; and Tatiana Geron’s, Janine Bempechat’s, Sara O’Brien’s and others’ workshop focused on addressing ethical dilemmas in educational environment through normative cases and conversations. Naturally, a 4-day rich program with 4–6 sessions running at the same time cannot be described as fully as it deserves, among other things, also because of the spacetime, which cruelly narrows our possibilities to visit all sections we would like to.

A total of 299 presenting authors from all continents participated in the conference, 129 outputs were presented. Some of the papers formed thematically related symposia, of which there were 10 in total, with titles such as: *Employing Moral Exemplars in Moral Education: Empirical Evidence and Assessment*, *Expect the Unexpected: How a Kindness Project is Transforming School Communities*, *How Children are Learning to and about Care across Three Cultures: Finland, USA, & Taiwan*, or *Character development and flourishing in late adolescent and young adult populations*.



From left: Martin Brestovanský, Marvin Berkowitz, Judith Smetana, Larry Nucci, Andrej Rajský.

There were two of us from Slovakia, my colleague Andrej Rajský and I, and we presented *Conceptual structure of the master's study program of character education in Slovakia (1993–2023)*. Of special interest to the discussants was the fact that curriculum reform is underway in Slovakia and the Trnava team used this opportunity to innovate and strengthen the elements of moral and character education at the level of national curriculum principles and standards.

For the Slovak educational and academic reality, it is very important not only to be present in the global network of actors professionally engaged in moral education and to be an active part of current scientific debates, but also to be able to enter and influence these debates in a relevant way.