

Teaching as a Moral Vocation: Virtue Ethics and the Limits of Character-Based Professionalism in Peterson and Arthur's *Ethics and the Good Teacher*

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ABSTRACT

This review examines *Ethics and the Good Teacher: Character in the Professional Domain* by Andrew Peterson, coauthored with James Arthur, a text that argues that teaching is fundamentally a moral profession grounded in ethical responsibility. The book is addressed to a broad academic audience, including teachers, education professionals, policymakers, researchers, and students at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Drawing on Aristotelian virtue ethics—particularly the concept of *phronesis* (practical wisdom)—and empirical data primarily from United Kingdom educational contexts, the book advances a compelling case for character-based professional practice. This review finds that while the theoretical framework is substantive and the empirical data illuminating, the book would benefit from greater attention to the practical implementation of ethical principles within policy-constrained school environments, expanded coverage beyond UK contexts, and the development of concrete pedagogical tools such as reflective frameworks, rubrics, or structured guides to support teachers in applying its insights. Overall, the text makes a valuable contribution to the literature on professional ethics in education, though its analytical depth and cross-contextual applicability remain areas for further development.

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Ethics and the Good Teacher: Character in the Professional Domain, written by Andrew Peterson with James Arthur, was first published in 2020 (hardback) by Routledge (Taylor & Francis Group). It comprises 104 pages, carries ISBN 9780367335885, and is priced at £39.99.

Summary

The question of what it means to be a “good” teacher has gained renewed urgency in contemporary educational discourse, particularly as schooling systems across the globe face mounting pressures from marketization, performativity agendas, and the erosion of professional autonomy. In this context, Peterson and Arthur’s *Ethics and the Good Teacher: Character in the Professional Domain* (2020) represents a timely and substantive contribution. At a moment when character education and professional ethics are receiving growing attention in teacher preparation programs, this book offers a theoretically grounded argument for repositioning moral virtue at the center of educational professionalism. A notable gap in the existing literature concerns the empirical examination of how teachers at different career stages conceptualize character and navigate ethical dilemmas in practice; this book directly addresses that gap through data drawn from three UK-based research projects. This review therefore aims to assess the book’s theoretical coherence, the quality and applicability of its empirical evidence, the depth of its analytical

engagement, and the practical relevance of its recommendations—particularly for teacher educators, educational policymakers, and researchers working beyond the UK context.

Peterson and Arthur approach the question of what constitutes good teaching through the lens of Aristotelian virtue ethics, with particular emphasis on *phronesis* (practical wisdom) as the animating theoretical framework. This framework, rooted in the Jubilee Center’s Building Blocks of Professional Practice, positions character not merely as a personal attribute but as the professional foundation of ethical teaching practice. Within this framework, a good teacher must demonstrate high integrity and act honestly across all decisions. A good teacher always upholds ethical standards, as they understand that ethics is key to building trust, fostering a positive learning environment, and setting an excellent example for their students. Therefore, learning and understanding ethics and the good teacher is an invaluable investment for aspiring educators. It helps them become competent professionals and shapes a better society through quality and ethical education. The book *Ethics and the Good Teacher*, written by Andrew Peterson with James Arthur, is one of the references worth studying.

This book begins with an introduction, four main chapters, and a conclusion summarizing the main findings, recommendations, and areas for further research. Chapter 1 provides a brief overview of the current literature in the broader field of professional ethics. Arguing that ethics is at the core of what constitutes a “profession,” the chapter introduces the recent turn to virtue

and character in the literature on professions, with a primary focus on *phronesis* (practical wisdom). The Jubilee Center's Building Blocks of Professional Practice is also introduced in this context.

In Chapter 2, attention turns to the ethical nature of teaching and teachers. The authors argue that, as with any profession, ethics are a fundamental component of what makes a "good" teacher. By reviewing the current literature in the field, this chapter also highlights some of the impacts on ethical teachers of the increasing marketization and instrumentalism of education.

Chapters 3 and 4 present and analyze data from the three introduced projects. In Chapter 3, this data relates to teacher motivation, how teachers understand their role in developing young people's character, and how to prepare teachers for that role. The data shows that character and "making a difference in children's lives" is integral to what motivates prospective teachers to enter the profession. In addition, across the three primary studies referenced in this book, teachers at different career stages have reported seeing themselves as having an essential role in students' character development. However, evidence from these projects also suggests that as teachers progress through their careers, this role in character development is increasingly focused on performance rather than moral virtue.

In Chapter 4 (which is the final chapter of this book), the authors present and discuss data examining how teachers at different stages of their careers (Student Teachers, Newly Qualified Teachers, and Experienced Teachers) understand their personal character strengths and the character strengths they identify as "ideal"

or "good" teachers. In addition, based on data collected through The Good Teacher project, the authors present an analysis of responses to a series of ethical dilemmas teachers pose at different stages of their careers. Analysis of the dilemma data found that while most teachers can confidently apply moral virtues when making professional decisions, there are some situations where this is challenging (particularly when the virtues conflict). The data analysis also showed significant differences in responses based on career stage and gender. This book then concludes with Conclusions, Recommendations, and Further Research.

Significance

This book holds profound significance for a diverse audience within education. Teachers and education professionals will find its emphasis on character development and moral virtues essential to their practice, offering insights into how personal character influences student interactions and approaches to ethical dilemmas. By encouraging the integration of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) into daily teaching, the book enhances professional practice, particularly in complex ethical decision-making. Education policymakers, academics, researchers, and students at both undergraduate and master's levels will likewise benefit from its comprehensive exploration of virtue ethics in educational contexts.

For education policymakers, this book serves as an invaluable foundation for designing comprehensive policies that integrate character development and ethics into educational frameworks. By illuminating the crucial ethical dimensions of teaching, it provides policymakers with a conceptual

basis for creating environments that nurture character development among educators and students alike. The insights presented enable more effective evaluation and implementation of educational policies that transcend narrow academic outcomes to embrace the development of moral values and character formation within school communities. Policymakers will find practical guidance for balancing academic excellence with ethical development, ultimately creating more holistic educational systems that prepare students not only for academic success but also for ethical citizenship.

This book makes a substantial contribution to the professional ethics literature in education through its rich empirical data and thorough analysis. Academics and researchers will find its evidence-based findings and nuanced discussions serve as an excellent foundation for further investigation into ethical dimensions of teaching. The comprehensive exploration of character and virtue education provides a valuable reference source that not only enriches academic discourse on ethics in education but also offers adaptable frameworks for examining virtue ethics across various professional contexts. By bridging theoretical concepts with practical applications, the book creates new pathways for scholarly inquiry into how character development shapes professional identity and practice, ultimately advancing our understanding of how virtue ethics can transform professional fields beyond education.

For undergraduate and master's-level students in education, this book offers a comprehensive examination of the intrinsic connection among ethics, character, and the teaching profession, knowledge that is essential for those preparing to enter educational careers. Through its thoughtful exploration of ethical

dimensions, the text serves as both preparation for professional challenges and a guide for developing wisdom in addressing complex moral situations that arise in educational settings. Students will find particular value in how the book facilitates the development of a personal educational philosophy grounded in ethical values and virtues. By engaging with these concepts during their formative academic years, future educators can build a solid ethical foundation that will inform their instructional approaches, decision-making processes, and professional identities throughout their careers.

Critique and Recommendation

The book offers a profound examination of Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* (practical wisdom), drawing extensively on contemporary Aristotelian interpretations. Through its deep exploration of ethical considerations, it presents compelling arguments that illuminate previously inexplicable ideas about moral reasoning in education. However, the practical application of these philosophical concepts within classroom settings requires greater precision. While the research projects discussed originate primarily from UK educational contexts, their implications extend globally, though with some limitations. This UK-centric focus could be particularly intriguing for international readers seeking comparative perspectives. The book rightly emphasizes the significant role of ethical frameworks in education and addresses teachers' real-world challenges, yet it could further develop how these ethical principles could be implemented within increasingly mechanized educational systems.

The book primarily concentrates on K-12 educational systems, with particular emphasis

on early childhood education and its associated ethical dilemmas, but notably overlooks higher education contexts such as universities. This significant knowledge gap requires attention, especially from those responsible for developing educational policies across all levels. While the text offers valuable tools, theoretical frameworks, and practical articles that share common objectives, it could benefit from exploring how traditional teaching disciplines instill principles of conduct in diverse academic settings. The case analysis entries provide helpful insights, yet could be complemented by perspectives from international educational organizations that seek diverse approaches. Particularly valuable would be critical viewpoints from academic service professionals and educators who could share firsthand experiences of implementing student ethics theories in their pedagogy. Such varied information sources would offer unique insights and practical solutions applicable to different educational scenarios. Although ethics may seem abstract in educational discourse, it contributes meaningfully to untangling complex logical processes in teaching and learning contexts, making it essential for comprehensive educational theory.

This book presents a diverse narrative that will engage both aspiring and established educators, though its varied ideas would benefit from greater conceptual coherence. Throughout the text, the authors explore the relationship between personal character development and professional practice in teaching, while examining the ethical dilemmas educators face at different career stages. Rather than constructing a linear argument, the book invites readers to grapple with the complex interplay of ethics and character, raising the fundamental question of how personal virtue operates within the policy-constrained environments of

professional education. While the empirical data from the three referenced studies provides a meaningful foundation, the analysis remains largely descriptive rather than rigorously comparative. Cross-referencing the findings with parallel studies from non-UK contexts—such as virtue ethics frameworks applied in East Asian or Nordic educational systems—would substantially strengthen the book’s analytical claims. The recommendations for further research, while pertinent, would carry greater weight if more explicitly aligned with the needs of teacher education programs, educational policy reform, or applied research agendas. In sum, the book makes a compelling case that integrating academic understanding of virtue ethics with sustained professional reflection could strengthen the teaching community; yet realizing this potential more fully will require greater analytical depth, broader comparative engagement, and more targeted practical guidance.

Reviewer’s Particulars

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has enhanced efficiency while maintaining scientific integrity, as all data interpretation and conclusions remain the intellectual product of the human authors. We affirm our commitment to transparency regarding AI assistance, recognizing both its utility and limitations in the scientific process, and take full responsibility for the content presented herein.

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