

The role of human freedom in the development of the virtues

(Article for Polish book on forming character and virtues)

Catherine Dean

Strathmore University

Introduction

The term “character” can be defined in different ways but generally it is understood to refer to the distinctive and individual way of being developed by a person based on the initial temperament they have received at conception, as modified by the moral habits that the same person has acquired through his free choices and activity¹. These moral habits are qualities of the person that make him act usually in a particular manner. The good qualities are also known as virtues, while the negative or “bad” qualities that a person may have developed are normally known as the vices.

When we speak of “forming” a person’s “character” we are referring to a process in which the person is encouraged to develop the virtues, or good qualities proper to a human being. We do not speak of forming character in a dog or a cat or a monkey. Why is this? It is because they are not capable of developing virtues due to the fact that they do not have a spiritual soul with the capacity to know what they are doing and to choose to act in one way or another. In other words, the animal is not free to choose the type of activity he will carry out. Whereas the human being *is* free and *can* decide how he will act in each and every circumstance!

This is an interesting consideration because when speaking of “forming character” or character-development, the emphasis can often be on the task of parents and teachers who try to teach or educate children in virtue through the small day to day acts that the child carries out². This is certainly an important step in the process of character-building,

¹ Cf. D. KEIRSEY, Please understand me II. Temperament. Character. Virtue, Prometheus Nemesis 1998, p. 20.

² See, for example, D. Mannix, Character building activities for kids, Jossey-Bass, 2001; D. Isaacs, Character building. A guide for parents and teachers, Four Courts Press, 2001.

however the development of the virtues is not merely an “outside job” of parents and teachers. Ultimately, to develop real virtues each human being needs to take on the task personally and want himself to acquire those good qualities through the exercise of his freedom. We are saying, then, that human freedom comes into play in the process of developing the virtues and thus of forming character. The person concerned has to want freely to develop those virtues; he has to know what virtues are, be attracted by their goodness, and so freely want to develop them in himself. In this way he participates freely in the development of his own personal character.

In this article we will delve a little more deeply into the role of human freedom in the development of the virtues and character-formation. To achieve this we must start by looking at the human being as a whole and in his individual features, in order to understand who and what the person is and how he acts.

Who is the human person?

Down through the centuries the concept of person has changed and developed. I find it useful to take the definition of a 6th Century philosopher known as Boethius who stated that the person is “an individual substance of a rational nature”³. What does this rather technical definition actually mean? The expression “individual substance” refers to something that exists in and by itself. It is a whole and undivided thing in itself, and it exists separately from other things, such as, for example, a car or a computer. In a certain sense, it is absolute in as much as it doesn’t need other things in order to exist. As an individual, it has an existential unity that makes it different from other things of the same species. For example, a table is a whole thing which doesn’t depend on anything else; it is different from other tables, even though they may have exactly the same shape, colour, and so on.

However, not all individual substances are persons; the table is not a person. What makes the individual substance be a person? According to Boethius, it is the fact that the substance is of a rational nature; that is, the human person has the capacity for self-conscious, reflective and abstract thought. When we say that the person has a rational

³ BOETHIUS, *De duabus naturis*, c. 3, PL 64, 1343.

nature, we mean that he has a particular essence or way of being which makes him capable of thinking, reasoning, of reflecting, so that, from understanding some known thing, he can come to grasp or know some unknown thing.

Rationality distinguishes the way of being of the person from that of other individual substances, such as a chair. So, being a person means being a subject (an individual substance) of a rational nature whose most significant property is that he can think and thus be the internal source himself of his own free decisions, because he can know the truth.

How is the human person “made up” or constituted?

We may not think of ourselves as “subjects of a rational nature”, but we do all have the experience of thinking; we think about many things: ourselves, what we will do tomorrow, what that person is like, what that article I read on the Internet was all about and so on. Thinking is human and the fruit of our thinking is very often concepts, ideas which we retain in the mind. But what do we use to think with? We do not think with our big toe or our thumb. In philosophical terms the faculty we use for thinking is known as the mind or the intellect; the intellect is the capacity to think, to know, to acquire knowledge. Ultimately that which we seek to know through the intellect is the truth. The truth about the world around us, the truth about a friend, the truth about something that happened at work. Nobody wants to be told lies, to be deceived. As Saint Augustine put it: “I have met many who wanted to deceive, but none who wanted to be deceived”⁴.

But typically human activity does not stop at knowing the truth about things, people and so on. As we get to know the truth, we also perceive, understand or “grasp” the goodness of the known thing; it attracts us because we see it is good. So, for example, I may see an object that I do not recognise. Perhaps, upon examination, it proves to be a new model of mobile phone that has many high-powered functions. Once I get to know all that the phone can do, it begins to seem good to me, it attracts me and I begin to want to have that phone for myself. Or perhaps I meet a new person at some social event and as I speak with him, I get to know him better; almost immediately I will decide whether I

⁴ ST. AUGUSTINE, *The Confessions*, X, 23, 33.

like that person or not and whether or not I want to develop the friendship further. With what feature of myself do I want that good thing or like that good person? There may be an attraction at the level of sensitive feelings or emotions but sometimes our feelings do not respond to good things and yet we still find ourselves wanting or liking them. This is possible thanks to our will; the human will is another faculty of the person. Through the will we want, love or are inclined towards things or people or ideas because we have perceived or understood that they are good.

Both the intellect and the will are spiritual faculties which give rise to spiritual acts: the acts of thinking, knowing, wanting are essentially spiritual although they may have involved some form of activation of the senses before becoming spiritual. We cannot put our finger on an idea or a concept; we cannot see or hear the fact that we want something that seems good to us. All these experiences are important because they help us to understand that there is really a spiritual dimension to the human person, as initially suggested by Boethius' definition. In actual fact, this feature of the human person is also known as the spiritual soul. According to Aristotle, the soul is a life-giving principle and is to be found in anything that has life⁵. In the case of the human being this principle is called a spiritual soul precisely because the kind of acts that it gives rise to are spiritual in nature, as is the case with thinking or knowing and wanting or loving.

However, we also have evident experience of the fact that the human being is not pure spirit. We also possess a physical structure known as the human body which is made up of different materials, or matter in philosophical terms. If anyone doubts about the fact of having a body, let him take a walk without a coat when it is ten degrees below zero outside and he will soon feel the cold, he will change colour, etc. Or let him remember the headache he had one morning after drinking too much the night before. Our basic everyday experience tells us that we have a body with legs and arms, torso, eyes and ears, etc. At the same time, our body is not just an inanimate mass of matter. It is alive! We are alive! We can move our body as and where we wish. Our bodies are ourselves, they belong to us and are part of us, because they are animated by the spiritual soul which is our characteristic life-giving principle! Precisely, we experience daily that our body needs to be nourished and cared for so that our human life can be preserved, so that we

⁵ Cf. ARISTOTLE, *De anima*, I, 1, 402a; II, 1-2, 412-413.

can go on living. So we can see that our spiritual soul, the human life-giving principle, is rooted in matter!

Through reflection on our personal experience of life we can realise that as persons we human beings are made up of body and soul. We do not have a body and a soul as two pre-existing realities which are united to form the human person. Rather the human being is one whole reality made up of these co-principles: body and spiritual soul. So it is not just the eyes that see or the ears that hear or the intellect that thinks; it is the whole person who sees through the eyes, hears, thinks, wants and loves, thanks to the radical unity that exists between body and soul in the human person.

The world of human feelings

At the same time there is another element to human life which is of great importance and which in fact manifests the radical unity between body and soul in the person. This is the whole world of human affectivity; the passions, emotions or feelings that we all experience constantly. We can feel envy, anger, joy, love, and so many other emotions. The feelings often have a physical dimension to them: a person who feels angry may go red, their heart begins to beat faster, the facial expression changes, etc. At the same time, the reaction is not merely physical. There is also a psycho-spiritual dimension to feelings: one feels angry because they understand (intellect) that another person has harmed them, they reject, do not want (will) this harm to be done to them; all this can make them psychologically inclined to avoid the person who has done the harm, or they can feel inclined to do harm to the other person out of revenge, etc. So the whole emotional experience connected to the feelings actually reveals the intimate union between body and soul in human nature.

Delving a bit deeper, we may add that the feelings are also related to man's external and internal senses. Through the external senses (eyes, ears, touch, etc) we can receive the external physical stimulation of light, sound and so on. At the same time, human feelings are also connected with the internal senses (imagination, memory, etc) which assist us in perceiving and acquiring an initial understanding of what has happened to us. Through the imagination we can represent to ourselves the good or harm that has been

done, and we can use our memory to recall the stimulus of the feelings. For example, we may hear music (external sense), which reminds us (memory, internal sense) of someone who has passed away; we may imagine (imagination, internal sense) the person and as a result we begin to feel sad. The stimulation of these various senses is also involved in the world of human feelings, which reveals itself to be real and also complex by nature. In fact, many studies are currently being carried out on the whole area of human affectivity⁶.

Yet where do these feelings come from? What is their source? Some people speak of the “heart” as the source of human emotivity, however, the heart as such is a physiological organ, albeit essential for human life. Others think that the feelings are actually movements of the sensitive appetites, and so, have their source in these appetites. Here we are referring to the concupiscible appetite which is the inclination that one feels towards easily obtainable good things and is considered to be the source of such feelings as love, desire, joy, hatred, sorrow, etc. This appetite is more connected with goods and pleasures of the senses and so is understood to be related to the internal senses of perception and imagination, which capture sense knowledge. The irascible appetite is the faculty through which we experience the inclination towards goods that are difficult to obtain and is considered to be the source of feelings such as hope, courage, despair, fear, anger, etc. This appetite is occupied with the hardships and dangers that surround sensible goods and so is thought to be moved to act through knowledge of the memorial or estimative (common sense) sort⁷.

So human feelings would seem to have their origin in the sensitive appetites⁸ that are connected, in their turn, to the internal senses in man. From this perspective, the internal senses appear to be the point at which the physical dimension overlaps with and is united to the spiritual, intellectual dimension of the person. These senses are thus a very important factor in the whole human makeup in that they are the unifying point for body and soul. At the same time, as the ultimate source of human feelings, through the sensitive appetites, the internal senses play an important role in the life of the person as

⁶ See, for example: *Upheavals of thought: the intelligence of the emotions*, M.C. Nussbaum, Cambridge University Press, 2001; G. Corradi Fiumara, *The mind’s affective life: a psychoanalytic and philosophical inquiry*, Brunner-Routledge, 2001.

⁷ Cf. R.E. BRENNAN, *Thomistic Psychology. A philosophic analysis of the nature of man*, Macmillan 1941, pp. 150-151 and pp. 156-157.

⁸ Cf. ST THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 22, a. 3.

through them so much is perceived and acted upon. We can thus understand the importance of educating the internal senses so that the activity they give rise to in the feelings be directed towards the wellbeing of the person concerned.

Overall, we have identified three fundamental features of the person that are the sources of all human activity: the body, the spiritual soul (with the intellect and will) and human affectivity which embraces both. Let us recall that we wish to look at the role of human freedom in the development of the virtues. At this point we need to identify the source of freedom in the person in order to see how, through the exercising of our freedom, we can influence the way we act (through body, soul and feelings) and thus determine the type of qualities, or habitual ways of acting that we can develop, be they virtues or vices

Finding our freedom

A classical definition describes the free or voluntary act as one that “proceeds from an intrinsic principle, with formal knowledge of the goal”. The intrinsic principle would be the human will through which we tend towards good things because we want them for ourselves. The “formal knowledge of the goal” would be supplied by the intellect as the faculty through which we can know the truth about things as they are in reality. So the free act, human freedom itself is rooted in the intellect and the will. More specifically we can say that it is rooted in the inclination of the intellect towards knowing the truth and in the inclination of the will towards wanting that which is good. Both of these inclinations are natural to the human being because they are founded in the spiritual soul, which is intimately united to the body in the unity of the person. Pinckaers refers to these inclinations when he says “The natural root of freedom develops in us principally through a sense of the true and the good, of uprightness and love, and through a desire for knowledge and happiness”⁹.

We are thus saying that human freedom is rooted in our capacity to know the truth and to love what is good. On this basis we can affirm that freedom is the capacity

⁹ S. PINCKAERS, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, The Catholic University of America Press, 1995, p. 357.

we have as human beings to move ourselves towards that which we perceive to be good (rightly or wrongly), because we want to, and not moved by anybody or anything else. The good thing that we wish to obtain has been known by the intellect as good and wanted by the will because of its goodness. Whenever we move ourselves to obtain something good, be it material (food, clothing) or spiritual (education, culture) we are acting freely, we are using our freedom. We may add here that, through ignorance or mistaken perception, it is possible for us to know as good and want something that objectively speaking is not good for us as persons. In this case, we are actually misusing our freedom and are in danger of developing defects and vices rather than virtues.

Reflecting on our freedom we can see that in the knowing and wanting process, the person formulates *a goal* which he wishes or wants to obtain through his free human acts. Precisely, we act freely in order to achieve that particular goal because we know it as good and we want it for ourselves. For example, I may think about the possibility of doing a PhD and having done so, I may understand that it is both good and possible for me to obtain this qualification. As a result, I can begin to freely want that qualification through my will and thus formulate a clear goal for myself: that of working towards and getting the PhD.

However, things do not stop there. Knowing and wanting that goal, I can now begin to act in order to achieve it, which will involve investigating where, when, how I can go about studying; attending classes, doing exams, projects, thesis and so on until I eventually obtain the desired goal: a PhD! In this process we can see that once the goal is known and wanted, it somehow becomes the source of our free activity. The goal moves the person to act so as to achieve it and at the same time, this goal is the object towards which the person tends. We see therefore that the known goal is the good thing that attracts the will and so brings the person to act freely. We may add that the virtues too can be goals that the person gets to know and chooses to try to develop freely.

Here we are touching on the most distinctive aspect of the human person. Only we human beings are rational creatures who can know and want and so, can propose an objective to ourselves and actually freely go about achieving that goal! Only we human beings can set targets for ourselves, make (and break!) new year's resolutions, develop aims such as passing a particular exam, buying a specific car, achieving a certain position

in our professional world. And all this thanks to the fact that we have intellect and will and so we are free and can act freely!

Self-referentiality and personal modification

The voluntary act has various characteristics, but the one that concerns us most here is known as self-referentiality. Every free act has its own goal, but it also has the person himself who carries out the act as its goal. What does this mean? It means that the free act which the person does reverts back to the person, refers to and affects the person who does it. Just as the boomerang comes back to the person who threw it, the free human act “comes back” to the doer by changing that person in some way. When we stop to reflect on this we realise that it is true. A person who robs (steals), that is, carries out acts of robbery, *becomes* a robber (a thief); we call *the person* a robber. This means that we perceive and understand that the *act* which he has carried out has changed him as a *person*. So we see that there is a very close link between the free acts that we carry out, and who and what we are as persons.

We are saying, then, that every free human act has repercussions in the person who carries it out; it modifies the person one way or another; this is because to want something implies a personal evaluation of the wanted thing. It means that we have perceived that through this act we can obtain something good *for ourselves*. The person becomes committed as a person through each of his free acts; when a man decides on something, he is not only choosing some object which is outside himself, rather his decision implies wanting something for himself. When the act is carried out and the attractive goal or object is obtained, the person has actually changed himself, he has determined himself in some way through that decision and may thus enjoy possession of the achieved goal.

As a certain philosopher has said, “Man can do nothing without producing some change in himself through that act”⁶. For this reason we can say that the person, with his good free acts, determines himself, possesses himself and dominates himself in as much

⁶ L. POLO, *El conocimiento habitual de los primeros principios*, Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona, 1993, p. 55.

as he can freely decide to act in a given way or he can decide freely not to act in that way; in either case, he will have changed himself in some way. If, however, a person chooses wrongly, he misuses his freedom and so alienates himself from his true self. Ultimately, the person either possesses himself or “loses” himself through every free act because every free act is self-referential; it refers back to the person who carries it out because he wants the particular good object that is the consequence of the act, to belong to himself. It is he himself who wants to be a musician, or to own a special house or to know a certain computer language.

So every free act really modifies the person in an accidental way but in a way that affects the whole person. This is so because when a person wants something, in that free act he is claiming for himself, seeking for himself, the wanted thing, he wants it for himself and so he becomes tied up in the act of wanting. “The person decides about himself in every free act, not because the person himself is the object that is desired, approved, detested or hated, but rather, because it forms part of the very structure of wanting that the personal self wants that thing for himself, approving of it or rejecting it, while he does not claim for himself that which he knows; and if he does claim it for himself, it is through an act of the will. The intellectual possession proper to knowledge has great neutrality, and lacks that aspect of real possession that is proper to the act of the will. So, it is not necessarily a dishonest action to know about dishonest behaviour whereas, loving, desiring or enjoying a dishonest act makes the person who loves it dishonest. The faculty through which a person links himself to an object or an action is the will”⁷.

The daily challenge

The self-referentiality of the voluntary act is very important because each person is, in a certain sense, what he has done through his actions. In the case of free acts that have a moral dimension (and so can be classified as “good” or “bad”), the moral value of the act remains inside the person; he or she acquires that same moral value and so, may be described as a “good” or a “bad” person. It is because of this that we can say that man is

⁷ A. RODRIGUEZ LUNO, *Ética general*, Eunsa, Pamplona, 1991, p. 121.

capable of changing himself and of achieving fulfilment or frustration through his acts. Through each of his free acts, man can either seek perfection, express himself and also come to “be” himself, or he can also dehumanize and “lose” himself. Being a person is not something already pre-defined forever; we are always on the way to being more or less of a person. What we actually become will depend on our free acts, through which we “dominate” ourselves and make ourselves what we are. As persons, we have the challenge of tending each day through our actions, towards the perfection of our personal being. That is, we need to use our freedom to act in accord with our nature. This means that we are called to act freely in a manner that respects our human makeup as persons with body and soul, intellect and will, appetites and feelings as we have seen earlier on. Through the process of freely choosing to act in a way that respects our human nature or way of being, we acquire or develop what is known as *moral* freedom.

Thus we can see that the human person is fundamentally free by nature due to his spiritual soul with intellect and will. At the same time the person can develop their freedom through their free acts and thus obtain what is known as an “acquired” or “moral” freedom. We can see that human freedom is a genuinely dynamic concept and fact; it can grow stronger or weaker depending on how we use it. If we use our freedom well in accordance with our nature, that freedom grows and becomes stronger; we acquire greater moral freedom. If we use our freedom badly, to act against our nature, our freedom becomes weaker and our moral freedom diminishes. The daily challenge is to use our freedom well by acting in accordance with our nature, so that we acquire greater moral freedom and become better persons by carrying out good free acts, thus developing virtues. To be more specific, we grow in freedom if we use our intellect to know the truth about the possible acts we can carry out, to know the truth about the particular feeling that we may have in a given moment, and so choose to act in the best way possible by moving ourselves towards the greatest known good or by rejecting acts and feelings that are not truly good, that is, in accordance with our nature and dignity as human beings.

For example, a young university student may find that she is pregnant and needs to decide whether or not to terminate the pregnancy. We should point out that this girl will probably experience various different feelings such as fear about what others, perhaps her own parents, will think if she has a child; joy and hope because she is

carrying a new human life; annoyance if her university studies will be affected by this pregnancy, and so many other emotions that can arise at such a time. Intellectually she can come to know the value of the human life she is carrying inside and, in accordance with the natural human inclination to conserve and defend life, she can also know that to be true to her own dignity as a person, she ought to let the pregnancy come to term and deliver the child. So she can know the truth about the right way of acting. Now she must decide whether to freely follow that truth which indicates the best way of acting, and so choose to have the child or whether she will use her freedom to reject that truth and so moved by some other reason or feeling, choose to terminate the pregnancy through abortion. She will need to analyse her feelings in this context, in order to understand them as good or bad and to integrate them into her knowledge of the truly best way of acting and into her final choice of action. Acting freely, therefore, involves the intellect, the will and the feelings.

The daily challenge to use our freedom in accordance with our nature is ultimately the challenge to develop an habitually good way of acting, which involves the fostering of the virtues.

Developing the virtues

If we habitually freely choose to act in a “good” way, in conformity with our nature, as well as perfecting our freedom, we can become a good person who always acts well. In this same process, we also develop good habits, otherwise known as the virtues, and so become a virtuous person, a person of good character.

In *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle states that virtues or habits are not inborn but are rather acquired by the repetition of acts, through effort, when it is easy to act well and when it is not so easy¹⁰. Through his acts the person develops a permanent way of being (hard-working, responsible, etc.). The typically human acts, such as the decision to watch a particular movie or to choose a certain dish, are not automatic; rather, we carry them out freely, knowing what we are doing and doing it because we want to. Through our freedom, we have the possibility of choosing a type of behaviour that is worthy of us

¹⁰ ARISTOTLE, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 1, 1103 a., 33-35.

as human persons, such as helping those in need for example; or, on the contrary, choosing a form of conduct that degrades us, like stealing, which involves taking another person's property. Ultimately, the way we choose to act will determine the type of people we become.

Freedom offers us many chances to be the protagonists of good and bad acts. In this way, some people choose to be just, while others choose to be unjust; some choose to be hard-working, while others choose to be lazy, some, to be responsible or otherwise, irresponsible. When we freely choose to do good acts, we acquire, or develop virtues; if we freely choose to do bad acts, we develop bad habits, known as vices. "Each person is capable of virtue and of vice, precisely because they must develop their human nature. The development of his humanity in each man begins with his activity. If the acts did not influence his way of being, if they did not leave their mark, if they were not to modify or to perfect the human dimension in each person, man would not be a being who is open to his own essential growth"¹¹.

Virtues are therefore the goal of our free activity. They are good qualities that we know of and want to obtain, and so we can move ourselves towards developing them freely, because we want to. In this way we participate in the formation of our own character.

The virtues as operative habits: ways of acting

Thomas Aquinas defines virtue as "a good operative habit"¹². What is an operative habit? It is a stable quality, that becomes present in a person's potencies (intellect and will, irascible and concupiscible appetites) through the repetition of free acts, and which disposes him and inclines him to act in a certain way.

- a) **it is a stable quality:** this means that it is difficult to remove. A habit exists when there is a permanent inclination to act in a certain way and generally it manifests itself as a type of behaviour that characterizes each individual; for

¹¹ L. POLO, *Ética: hacia una versión moderna de los temas clásicos*, Colección AEDOS, Madrid, 1997, p. 91.

¹² ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 55, a. 3, c.

example, a generous person is normally generous in their deeds, words, acts because this quality has become part of their personality and it manifests itself in their activity;

- b) **a quality of the human being's operative potencies:** the person's operative potencies are those faculties or capacities which are a source of the person's activity. They are the intellect and will, the irascible appetite (through which the person is inclined towards carrying out actions to achieve a good that is difficult to obtain) the concupiscible appetite (through which the person acts to acquire easily obtained good things). Due to these faculties, the human person can control and direct his actions, and so exercise his freedom. The person thus enjoys a dominion over his acts through which he can forge good qualities or habits. The various virtues take root precisely in these operative faculties, which thereby become capable of habitually acting well. Fortitude, for example, develops in the irascible appetite, while prudence develops in the intellect, and so on with the various faculties and virtues.
- c) **it is proper to a habit to dispose and to incline the person to act in a certain way:** for example, as we can know the truth through our intellect, and love what is good with our will, if we constantly try to tell the truth or to love our parents, children or siblings, those actions cause a strengthening in the operative faculties whereby we will always try to protect the truth through sincerity, truthfulness, etc, and to love by choosing the best possible good.

Through these free and good acts the person acquires greater perfection; he or she becomes more of a man or a woman. For this reason, it is said that habits are like a second nature: they make the person capable of a new way of acting, and give free actions the same spontaneity that characterizes the purely natural operations.

True virtue

Virtue should not be confused with mere custom. It is not the simple repetition of acts, moved by habit; rather, it involves the perfecting of our capacity to know the truth and to love what is good, thus developing our freedom through those actions. The person, through the operative potencies perfected by the virtues, can carry out good acts with ease and promptly, with pleasure and in a natural way, in different circumstances and with different objects. For this reason, we can say that virtue is “that which makes the person who has it good and that which makes his acts good”¹³. Virtues have the property of making one live in an upright manner, that is, it disposes man to behave in a way that is proper to his own nature, strengthens his will and makes freedom give good fruits. Thanks to the virtues, the person acquires an inner strength that he did not have before, and hence, he becomes capable of doing things that had previously seemed impossible.

In particular, through the virtues we can analyse our feelings and come to know if they are good, respecting our human nature, or bad, because they go against our nature. We can then freely choose to act in accordance with our feelings, or to reject them and leave them aside, in order to foster positive emotions in ourselves. The virtues help us in harmonising the activity of the senses, the spiritual soul and the feelings so that we can achieve the greatest good possible in each situation.

Having spoken in general about the virtues and how they are the development of our natural inclinations towards goodness and truth, we can all say that it is one thing to want to be virtuous, and it is another to actually be virtuous. All our good intentions to be generous, cheerful, honest and so on, can come to nothing when our weaknesses and faults show their ugly heads. So, it is not always easy to act in a virtuous way. “Experience thus shows us our need for an education at the moral level... We need to learn what it is to be human, through education in freedom...freedom for excellence requires the slow, patient work of moral education in order to develop”¹⁴. In other words, in order to grow in virtue we need to work at acting virtuously and to achieve this, we must work at strengthening our freedom, we need to grow in freedom.

¹³ ARISTOTLE, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 6, 1106, a. 22-23.

¹⁴ S. PINCKAERS, *op. cit.*, p. 359.

As we have been seeing, freedom plays an important role in the development of virtue: we need to want to act well in order to actually do so. If we wish to grow in virtue, we need to focus on growing in freedom. Thus we can see that growth or education in virtue goes hand in hand with growth or education in freedom. If we educate our freedom we will grow in virtue.

Education in freedom and education in virtue

How can we develop our freedom in order to grow in virtue? “There are three basic stages of education in freedom, comparable to the three stages of human life. Childhood corresponds to what we shall call the stage of discipline, adolescence to the stage of progress, and adulthood to the stage of maturity or the perfection of freedom”¹⁵.

The rule of life

The first step in educating in freedom, as occurs in childhood, involves learning to practice the rules of life, and in this case, the rules of moral life. At this point, we need to discover that that these laws of right and wrong are not rules meant to destroy our freedom or to enslave us. Rather, by indicating the need, for example, to be generous and to share our goods with others, we develop our capacity to carry out actions of real excellence by removing dangerous excesses such as selfishness or meanness from our lives.

Little by little, each individual person needs to discover how to reconcile his freedom with these moral laws by seeing that they help us to use our freedom well, according to our natural and intimate sense of truth and goodness. “Thus the law leads us to the discovery of a deeper freedom beyond the external, superficial kind we enjoy. It opens us to an interior voice, which enlightens and attracts us as no other can. The education that began externally has thus finished by exerting an interior influence that alone can unite moral law and freedom, so as to give the latter a running start”¹⁶.

¹⁵ Idem.

¹⁶ Idem, p. 362.

A “taste’ for goodness

The second stage in the education of freedom involves developing a taste for moral quality or goodness, along with the personal effort to act always according to excellence in spite of the difficulties that this may involve. Little by little, the person leaves the desire for pleasure or reward or the fear of punishment aside as they are no longer the basis for his actions. Now, he chooses to act in a good way moved by love of virtue for its own sake, and by love of others for their own sake. “Thus a person learns to carry out a task with care, to practice justice, act honestly, seek the truth and love sincerely, even though such actions may require sacrifice or may be unnoticed by others. It is an apprenticeship in work well done, in daily courage, patience and perseverance and, in the end, the discovery of a joy very different from pleasure, because it is the result of our actions and character rather than of external events”¹⁷.

Through this perseverance in good actions, the person develops virtues which reveal themselves to be a personal capacity for acting in a particular way and thus, the virtues are actually forms of power that help us to act well and so to grow and progress in perfection and goodness.

Self-mastery

The third and final stage in educating freedom corresponds to maturity. This is shown in our acquired mastery over excellent actions. The person has now developed an overall idea of his life and where he is going. As a result, he always acts according to a plan so that he can achieve his life project little by little, in spite of the difficulties and the obstacles that he may come across. And this project gives meaning, value and fruitfulness to his existence. The person has now developed very many virtues or good qualities which give him the power to live his life as he wants, according to that life project. “They are like a sheaf of interior energies bound together by our persevering efforts to follow our vocation...Self-mastery draws together our faculties, ideas, desires, and feelings,

¹⁷ Idem, p. 363.

directing them all to the higher end we are pursuing. In this way, our personality is integrated and acquires autonomy in regard to external events”¹⁸.

Moral wealth

At this stage in his personal growth the person has a goal in life, be it family, professional, social or other, which gives unity and coherence to all his actions. He has also developed his own personal character which is stamped on all his free moral actions. At this level, his personality shows through in the way he uses his freedom to act well in each circumstance. This does not mean that all mature people act in the same way. Rather, each individual has in a personal way, made good use of his freedom to develop those virtues, and so, moved by his own intentions and life project, given rise to an individual and personal way of acting and living.

The other characteristic element of this maturity in virtue is the person’s openness to other human beings. “Rooted in our hearts are those virtues that benefit others, such as justice (which is the firm resolve to give others their due), generosity, friendship, and many others”¹⁹. Hence our freedom has reached maturity because we are capable of combining our own personality, interiority, with care for and interest in others, the capacity to reach out to others and not to distance ourselves from them.

“We rediscover this union of personality and openness to others at the level of works accomplished. The work of excellence, the moral achievement perfect in its ordering, is so personal that it reflects its author in the depths of his being: he is recognized as good, just, generous, upright, charitable. He is known through his actions, somewhat as a great artist is recognised in his works, which need no signature. Works win a wide audience and touch those who know them most profoundly, for a work possesses the savour and perfection of a ripe fruit offered to the individual. In the same way, an excellent moral action is presented to another as a fruit intended for that person, a fertile seed to be received, a model to inspire, and an attractive example to imitate. Here it is appropriate to recall the Aristotelian definition of virtue: it renders good not only the act and the one

¹⁸ Idem, p. 366.

¹⁹ Idem, p. 367.

who performs it but still more those who profit by it and who may, in their turn, become fruitful because of it”²⁰.

The person who strives to develop virtues is strengthening his freedom on one hand, and is also developing personally as an individual. These good qualities that the person fosters in himself belong to the person as such and they also manifest themselves in the way that the person lives and acts. Hence, a person who is honest or lives temperance or is cheerful reveals the richness and value of his own inner life. That moral wealth contributes to the inner beauty of that person. As human beings, we ought to consider whether the external beauty or pleasant appearance that we may have is matched by inner beauty. Do we possess moral wealth? Are we persons of character who have achieved maturity through the battle to foster the different virtues in ourselves while at the same time educating our freedom?

Conclusion

We thus come back to the point we made at the start: truly effective character formation, which is intimately related to growth in virtue, requires the free collaboration of the person involved. Initially the child will learn to practice the virtues through external stimulus from parents and other educators. Later, as the child develops, educators should appeal to his intellect, will and feelings in order to help him *want* to grow in virtue. He needs to know what the virtues are, appreciate their goodness and be attracted by them in order to actually want to foster them in himself. At this point he can take on the task of his own character development through growth in virtue in a truly free and personal manner. When we understand that character development is ultimately a personal concern that calls upon the freedom of each individual, we also appreciate the fact that growth in virtue and the strengthening of our character is an on-going challenge. We will never be able to say “I am now perfect and have acquired all the virtues and developed my character fully”. On the contrary, as dynamic and free human beings we are constantly being faced by new challenges, and thus we always have further opportunities to strengthen our character by exercising our freedom in the task of growing in virtue.

²⁰ Idem, pp. 367-368.

