On Character Education: Self-Formation and Forms of Life in a Morphogenic Society

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Abstract: The essay discusses the concept of *character*, and some related notions, as they emerge in the contemporary discourse on education. The aim of this article is to provide a sociological interpretation of the increasing relevance of such notions within education policy agendas at the global level. More precisely, the focus is on what could be described as an *intensification of reflexivity* upon the human being, and a growing interest in the 'whole child' in educational agendas, i.e. in personal development beyond the learning outcomes regarding academic topics. The argument develops three main points. First, the principal structural and cultural conditionings are examined that play a role in fostering the renewed importance of personhood. Furthermore, different conceptual frameworks are examined that result in different psycho-semantics. The essay shows how such concepts as character and social and emotional skills (SES) epitomize different, comprehensive conceptions of human selfhood. The article examines their divergence and convergence alike. Finally, some possibilities of integration between the approaches of character and SES are briefly sketched.

Keywords: character, social and emotional skills, education, selfhood

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Introduction. The re-emergence of character in education – and why bother

The following reflections concern the concept of *character*, and some related concepts revolving around what are often regarded as crucial human qualities, as they emerge in the contemporary discourse on education. The aim of this article is to provide a sociological interpretation of the increasing relevance of such a notion within education policy agendas at the global level. More precisely, my focus is on what could be described as an *intensification of reflexivity* upon the human being, and a growing interest in the 'whole child' in educational agendas, i.e. in personal development beyond the learning outcomes regarding academic topics like mathematics, history, or reading skills.

The argument will develop in three main points. First, the principal structural and cultural conditionings will be examined that play a role in fostering the renewed importance of personhood. Furthermore, I will claim that different conceptual frameworks result in different psycho-semantics. Different concepts like that of character or of social and emotional skills in education epitomize different, comprehensive conceptions of human selfhood. I will therefore describe their divergence and partial overlap. Finally, I will outline a few directions the research and policy agendas may take, depending on the approach they assume to moral and character education, and will briefly sketch some possibilities of integration.

Through this *démarche*, I want to make a few substantive points. First, the article will show that the new emphasis on 'humanity', its powers and potentials has deep roots in the highly differentiated system of global society, and cannot be traced back to the usual 'litany of alarm' concerning the ills of society and the social problems of young people, like crime rates, sexual abuse, risk behaviour, drugs, truancy, and so forth[1]. Therefore, character education does not necessarily reflect the worried attitude of traditionalist, authoritarian nostalgia for the past.

Moreover, the aim of this essay is not to argue for or against one specific notion of character, or one particular way to translate it into educational practice. As a sociologist, I do not think such issues can be settled *a priori* beyond rather generic references to obviously shared 'good'

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[1] I take this formulation from James Arthur, who aptly rejects the allegation (Arthur, 2014, pp. 50-52).

vs. 'bad' human traits. The challenge is to understand how the current societal dynamics – with the erosion of our customary, modern time-space structures – prompt the emergence of new forms of personal and social life, thereby shaping the human *characteristics* needed to inhabit such an environment. The challenge consists of the tensions centred on the complex relationship that binds social and cultural change with the meanings of being human articulated in various regions of the cultural system and lived out in everyday life. Sociological analysis has often seen the impact of social change on character as sheerly adaptive and clearly corrosive (Sennett, 1998; Hunter, 2000). On the other hand, although it remains true that society puts a prize on some types of character and a penalty on others, character education still holds out the hope that persons can become something 'more' or 'better' than what they are. In this respect, it maintains a connection with some notion of self-improvement and 'verticality' (Sloterdijk, 2013). Furthermore, character may even become the symbolical centre of counter-cultural resistance, insofar as 'people of character' are defined as those who will not go with the drift of the socio-cultural mainstream, and will be able to keep to their lifestyles even as a minority group. In this sense, character would constitute the *formula of transcendence* education uses to exceed the given social arrangements.

In sum, the educational doctrines and practices revolving around human character – in their various semantics – are an important benchmark of deep cultural change. How this happens, and where it could lead, is something we are just beginning to understand.

The coming morphogenic society and the hardship of being human

There are various ways in which social theory has been tackling the complexity of contemporary global society and its ongoing change. Among these conceptual frames, we assume the morphogenetic approach as a helpful interpretation of the current societal predicament[2]. Such an approach has recently prompted a substantive thesis about macro-social

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[2] Its theoretical foundations have been laid by Margaret Archer. See Archer, 1995, for a systematic outline. See also Archer, 2011, for a helpful summary of the model in its explanatory function.

change, namely that of an emerging morphogenic society[3]. A few words of explanation are in order. The word 'morphogenetic' refers to the intrinsic tendency of all human societies to generate and change (social) forms – institutions, organizations, cultures, etc.. The morphogenetic approach provides the conceptual tools to study the logics of such processes, as the outcome of complex interactions between structure, culture, and agency, and the resulting emergent effects. But what is a 'morphogenic society'? In a nutshell, a morphogenic society is one in which the change-driving (morphogenetic) characteristics of society are substantially more dominant than the stability-enhancing (morphostatic) characteristics; so a morphogenic society (hereafter MS) is one that tends to undergo profound and – in principle – boundless change. Thus, I call 'morphogenic' the specific societal syndrome characterized by the situational logic of opportunity, stemming from 'unbound morphogenesis' (i.e. one unfettered from morphostasis) and possibly leading to a wholly novel societal formation.

Our present aim is not to develop or discuss such a conceptual framework. Our point here is to highlight a few big 'social facts' that can be traced to that core mechanism of change, thereby finding a consistent unifying interpretation.

The emergence of the MS obviously entails massive social change along many different dimensions[4]. Three sets of phenomena are especially important for our present argument:

(a) the explosion of possibilities for action and experience;

(b) the acceleration of social life;

(c) the saturation of social and symbolic space.

Let us briefly outline all of them, and explain how they meaningfully connect with an intensified reflexive focus on human powers and properties.

(a) The *multiplication of possibilities for action and experience* lies at the core of the MS and of its 'engine', i.e. the logic of opportunity. Scientific and technological innovation are clearly supporting this process. The related transformations of the economic sphere, particularly of work and working environments, the increased centrality of the human resource

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[3] The thesis has now been articulated in a series of volumes. See Archer (Ed.), 2013; 2014; 2015; 2016.

[4] Some of the most relevant dynamics are explored in Archer (2014).

(represented in the educational discourse by such concepts as personalization, creativity, problem solving skills, etc.), and deep cultural change (e.g. one concerning values), coalesce to generate new personal lifestyles and forms of social life.

(b) *Social acceleration* theory has been proposed as a particular perspective from which modernization theory can be reinterpreted. The basic idea is that 'large' social dynamics, meso-level processes, and interactions in everyday life are increasingly accelerating, changing individual and collective 'rhythm of life', disrupting old equilibria in temporal structures as well as in our personal use of time – e.g. the work/family balance, the shape and trajectory of personal biographies, etc. Arguably, it should not be (too ambitiously) treated as a 'first mover' of social morphogenesis, but as an empirical generalization that keeps together a large set of empirical evidence concerning the temporal structures of society. Its connection with the generative logic of the MS has been articulated before[5].

(c) A further element must be added, although its inherent relationship with the MS would need more explanation than I can offer in this article. It may be called the *saturation of social and symbolic space*, and it is really the emergent effect of two different factors. One is the enormous growth of relational and communicative networks – increasingly consisting of virtual relationships – that fill every gap of silence and claim a growing amount of our time[6]. The other might be introduced by a quote from Karl Jaspers: «A total metamorphosis of history has taken place. The essential fact is: *There is no longer anything outside*. The world is closed. The unity of the earth has arrived»[7]. Despite the obviously suspicious nature of such grand and sweeping declarations, this is a very consequential point, about which sociologists would probably have to reflect more systematically than they have done so far. What I want to emphasize here is that these two big

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[5] See Maccarini (2014). For a recent formulation of social acceleration theory see Rosa (2013).
[6] Such a phenomenon, well known to all communication experts, and indeed to all of us inhabitants of late modern societies, was effectively described, among others, by Kenneth Gergen (1991).
[7] See Jaspers (1953, p. 127). The italics is mine.

'social facts' converge on generating a unified[8], saturated communicative, symbolic, and physical environment for people to inhabit.

One outcome of these trends can be summarized as an intensified *pressure upon human beings*, which is the other face of the coin of the now fashionable 'centrality of the person'. We already know that the MS involves the crisis of routine action and the rise of the *reflexive imperative* (Archer, 2012). The continuity and congruity of social contexts is increasingly disrupted by boundless morphogenesis. Novel situations emerge, and people can hardly find guidance for their course of action in habits and routines. As a consequence, they must increasingly rely upon their personal reflexivity, as the capacity to evaluate one's life plans in relation to a changing world. The imperative to select among possible experiences and actions involves an enhanced effectiveness in decision making. We might now venture to extend such a hypothesis, considering the widening and intensification of reflexivity to be covering just *one* aspect of a more complex phenomenon, namely a *multidimensional pressure on the human*. Such a pressure surely includes reflexivity and the 'selective imperative', with the related issue of decision making. However, the trends of social change outlined above also push to flexibility and adaptation, and are increasingly demanding in terms of the *personal effort* required to participate in social processes of any kind – from education to work, down to health, civic life, and so forth. Performance is no more confined to the sphere of the market economy. Activation, mobilization, investment, initiative, have become keywords of social life, as well as passwords to get services.

The dynamics of European welfare systems is a helpful example. The idea that people must be enabled to help themselves, learning to protect themselves from risks, and that this requires their wholehearted mobilization, is now rather commonsensical in most welfare literature, e.g. in the new mainstream of 'social investment'.

As a result of this, education has achieved a central position in lifestyle and the life course, while new, hybrid policy mechanisms arise that are centered on education and training (Miettinen, 2013). While this situation is quite clear, few seem to have seen its consequences in terms of the personal

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[8] To speak of a 'unified' social space here does emphatically not signify one that is free from conflict. I just mean to suggest the strict interdependence and the lack of 'distance' between regional societies, social spheres, social groups, and so on.

stress and strain these social dynamics bring about at the personal level. And while concern-oriented reflexivity is the response to the choice-and-decision making issue, it is more unclear how people can positively cope with the rest of the problem.

In other words, the present situation could be described as a crisis (or indeed, the end?) of *Entlastung*. The concept of *Entlastung* (literally 'exoneration') must be traced to Arnold Gehlen (2007; 2013). Basically, his point is that humans as vulnerable, flawed beings need help in what are crucial dimensions of their surviving and thriving. This is the task of institutions. Now, what I am arguing here is that the capacity of institutions to perform such a task might be sharply declining. Some authors would counter that institutions are simply switching to 'enabling institutions', and that the related 'malaise' can be explained away as a peculiar characteristic of some particular countries (see e.g. Ehrenberg, 2010). For what merits such studies may have, it remains true that institutions are now bound to take on a different, and less ambitious function than they had in the past. Moreover, it is also the capacity of society to build and regenerate effective institutions that is here called into question. Participating in institutions and their organized forms of life, making one's way through them and their consolidated paths – for example, successfully completing a 'curriculum' – ultimately makes less sense than ever. The human person is becoming central in global society, but this means she must increasingly fall back on herself. And she needs a broader range of skills than she once used to.

Character and skills: education as psycho-semantics

The MS and the related emergent phenomena – the explosion of variety, acceleration, and saturation – constitute a profound and multifarious challenge for education to face. Its academic aspect could be summarized in a fundamental question: what should we learn, and how? Curriculum redesign is becoming as timely as ever. First there is a quantitative problem. Should we continue to learn all we have learned so far, while including novel competencies and knowledge in the curriculum? Can we really do this, or do we have to be selective? What can be forsaken and forgotten? Many plans to redesign teaching and learning emphasize the following competencies:

(i) basic competencies: recognizing patterns, memory, rapidity in processing information;

(ii) acquiring knowledge: access, extract, interpret information;

(iii) elaborate knowledge: reflect, argue, conceptualize.

Be that as it may, these problems only scratch the surface of a deeper issue. What kind of person should be the goal of education in this societal context? What kind of *powers*[9] and qualities should a person possess to make her way through that social world?

Answers to these questions are widespread in a huge literature, particularly in developmental psychology and the educational sciences. They usually include long lists of personal characteristics, couched in different languages and theoretical frameworks. It is not my aim to examine them in detail, and decide which ones are more important than others, or what method should be used to bring them about[10]. On a higher level of abstraction, the point is to highlight two distinct educational semantics. Although they entail obvious inner differentiation, they can be said to represent the main cultural alternatives, and to be systematically linked with more general psycho-semantics. We can indicate these doctrines through the labels of *character education* and of *social and emotional skills*, respectively. I will try to illustrate their main meanings, divergence and convergence as different ways for educational semantics to react to social change.

What do we mean by character in the first place? The concept of character has both a formal and a substantive meaning. In a formal sense, it has been described as the ethical aspect of our personal traits, or the ethical value placed on our desires and on relations to others. It is meant to qualify our moral connection to the world, and it refers to the long term aspect of our emotional experience (Sennett, 1998, pp. 10; see also pp. 140 ff.). Loyalty, commitment, pursuit of long term goals, delayed gratification for the sake of a future end all fall within the range of what sociology usually means with the term 'character'. A more systematic approach takes three dimensions into consideration, defining character as comprised of moral

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[9] The idea of 'empowerment' in educational doctrines and practices should also be read in this perspective.

[10] Detailed analyses are to be found in an extended literature. See the significant synthetic efforts in the thorough accounts by Nucci, Narvaez and Krettenauer, 2014; John and De Fruyt, 2015; Schleicher et al., 2015. These also constitute the basic ground of my own account in the following pages.

discipline, moral attachment, and moral autonomy[11]. Discipline refers to the capacity of an individual to inhibit his or her personal appetites or interests, or to delay gratification. Following Hunter and colleagues, we could say that moral discipline is the inner capacity for restraint—an ability to inhibit oneself in one's passions, desires, and habits within the boundaries of a moral order. Moral attachment points to a positive element, namely a greater good or ideal to affirm and live by, a commitment which justifies sacrifice[12]. Finally, the element of moral autonomy highlights the idea that actions and decisions can only be ethical when they are made freely. Controlled behavior cannot be moral behavior, for it removes the element of discretion and judgment. Character is therefore constituted by the relational bundle of these moral properties It is shaped throughout the process of identity building, emerging through emotions, deliberations, practices, and ethical habits that come to define a lifestyle.

This process does not happen within the boundaries of the personal psychic systems, but involves a continuous conversation between structural and cultural conditioning factors (among which moral ideals), on the one hand, and personal reflexivity on the other hand. Character has its symbolic and social ecology. In its substantive sense, character is constituted by the enactments of some particular moral ideals. Embracing such ideals and enacting them within the institutions of particular communities or spheres of social life establishes a circular process, through which particular types of character develop and in turn come to influence the way social roles are played out and organizations or institutions work. The related moral properties are valorized in a society's social institutions and celebrated in those exemplars who practice them well[13]. Therefore, the substantive sense of character involves its cultural content, insofar as it defines the personal properties, habits, lifestyles, forms of reasoning and even of emotional life

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[11] This definition can be found in the *Moral Foundations of Education Project* by the Institute of Advanced Studies in Culture, University of Virginia, and it is a further articulation of previous work on the subject (see above all Hunter, 2000; Seider, 2012).

[12] This aspect was emphasized by Douglas Porpora (Porpora, 2001). This originally shaped an interesting complementarity between his work and Hunter's cited book on character (Hunter, 2000), which has now been registered within the comprehensive definition we are currently discussing.

[13] In this sense, a sociology of character might usefully interact with Boltanski and Thévenot's work on 'grandeur' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006).

to which a given society – or a given subsystem of society – attaches a positive judgment and a consistent normative reinforcement.

The level of aggregation on which this can be observed obviously depends on the researcher's perspective and interest. In this sense it is possible to maintain that there is a 'protestant', a 'modern', a 'bureaucratic', an 'American', an 'authoritarian' vs. 'anti-authoritarian' character, and more, depending on the research focus and the field of inquiry.

Insofar as the concept of character has been developed within the educational discourse, its connection with social structures and cultures has also been shaped by an educational intention. The basic questions one wants to answer through the study of character are about the moral state of society, and how to improve it. Therefore, the educational literature evokes numerous human characteristics and qualities the authors regard as important in and for society – from justice to motivation, to mindfulness, etc. Such qualities can also be studied as indicators of what culture provides as a resource to connect with society.

A sociological interpretation of the contemporary relevance of character must take into account two, distinct though mutually interweaving lines of thought that may be identified in the uses and development of the concept. These convey different concerns, as well as different educational agendas regarding the relationship between society and personhood, between social structures and human agency.

a) the *socio-historical* line: since its emergence, the idea of character has highlighted the reaction on the personal level to phases of rapid social change (morphogenesis) in the dynamics and differentiation of society. Cultural historians have argued that a 'culture of character' was meant to be the personal companion to Weber's grim view of Western capitalism, following the pattern of *Entzauberung*. In this context, the concept of character indicates the trajectory of personhood from early capitalism – with the related disruption of existing social structures and cultures – down to consumerism and technology supported hedonism. In a nutshell, the 'changes in character', and its eventual decline giving way to 'personality', are meant to describe the trajectory from instrumental individualism, with its syndrome of self-control, to expressive individualism, featuring the

well-known earmark of anxiety, depression, and fragility[14].

As the twentieth century drew to a close, character, and character education, became part of the dynamics opposing virtue-based to principle-based accounts of morality, within the frame of the liberal-communitarian debate. Then, since the beginning of the twenty-first century the virtue vs. duty issue has been absorbed within a more complex discussion concerning globalization and its implications for morality. The relevance of such a discussion is focused upon the consequences for moral education of a world inhabited by multiple cultural, religious, and lifestyle communities. This situation involves problems and challenges that include, but go far beyond those of 'solidarity between strangers'.

The current situation reflects the effort to react to the pressure related to the MS, social acceleration and the end of *Entlastung*.

The emphasis falls either on the economic or on the political system. The effect of capitalism and consumerism on character is invariably held to be disruptive. It is in this vein that Sennett (1998) worries about how we decide what is of lasting value in a society which focuses on the immediate moment. How can long term goals be pursued in an economy devoted to the short term? How can mutual loyalties and commitments be sustained in institutions which are constantly breaking apart or continually being redesigned? These are the questions about character posed in the new, flexible capitalism[15].

At the same time, a whole literature – from Tocqueville to Bellah and colleagues, from Riesman to Porpora – has considered character and the related educational programs to be crucial for the democratic quality of social and political life. This seems to show that American society still perceives its own essential qualities as meaningfully related with personal properties, while Europe has been developing along a path of social immunization from human traits. Such a hypothesis of divergent evolution within the West must be investigated further, as it could have far-reaching implications for the future of our societies.

b) The scope of these concerns becomes even clearer if we examine the *ontological* meaning of the concept of character, and its place in social theory. In this context, character is often opposed to personality and the

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[14] This is the view most cultural historians hold. See, with reference to American society, Susman, 1984; Lasch-Quinn, 2007.
[15] Such a critique is also somewhat echoed by Boltanski and Chiapello (2007).

Self, the latter being «a strictly psychological term, deliberately stripped of the moral and metaphysical implications (…), one that asks to be evaluated strictly by the non-judgmental therapeutic standard of 'health'.» (McClay, 2007, p. 9). The main problem here is what concept prevails as a societal psycho-semantic. This perspective qualifies social change as conducive to the shift from person and character, on the one hand, to personality and 'psychological man', on the other hand, which is supposed to emphasize morality vs. psychic health as the focal points of alternative anthropologies. It is with this thrust that Charles Taylor noted how social science involved a reductionist view of the self (Taylor, 1989, pp. 33-35), in which horizons are restricted and moral dimensions are transformed into personality features. One practical consequence is that the emphasis on personality will produce weak characters. Character would indeed continue to include an idea of flourishing as the normative goal of human development. Such 'betterness' indicates the moral dimension of selfhood. Then of course further divides emerge about what conceptions of such flourishing must prevail. Be that as it may, the notion of character often works as a humanistic counterpart to the social scientific view of the human person.

The continual interrelations between these two lines of thought shape moral crises, tensions, challenges, and responses in different societal contexts. Both converge in the current re-emergence of 'character' as a psycho-semantic that is meant to defend (i) a moral foundation of self-consistency, integrity, and human dignity, and (ii) the critical capacity to resist social and cultural drift, reconstructing a way to enact social roles with some moral quality. As a latent human property or power, character becomes particularly important every time the *Entlastung* of institutions seems to be declining. Its relevance lies in exceeding education as socialization, and empowering alternative forms of education, agency, and personal as well as social life.

To sum up, the idea of character has clearly been a tool for social critique in the face of social change that is claimed to jeopardize both the human quality of social life and the social conditions of human flourishing. Not surprisingly, it appeals to countercultural groups, who perceive the world-as-it-is and the current cultural mainstream as inherently hostile to their ways and lifestyles.

My thesis is that analogous personal properties are appreciated – albeit on the ground of rather different concerns – in very different regions of the global social structure and cultural system, by actors working within a

different scientific paradigm. And this 'strange convergence' lends some support to the hypothesis that these educational psycho-semantics could represent reactions to the same social changes characterizing the MS, particularly those I have claimed to result in the increased pressure upon the human person.

The line of thought I am referring to revolves around the concept of *social and emotional skills* (hereafter SES). Social and emotional skills could be defined as individual capacities that (a) are manifested in consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviours, (b) can be developed through formal and informal learning experiences, and (c) influence important socioeconomic outcomes throughout individual's life (OECD, 2014; OECD, 2015). Now, SES are increasingly at the centre of scholarly and education policy attention. The tendency to some sort of 'SES mainstreaming' appears in the policy oriented research agendas by global actors (e.g. Schleicher et al., 2015) as well as by groups of scholars (Elias et al., 2014; John and De Fruyt, 2015)[16].

The root of such a growing interest for SES lies in the fact that the global economic and working environments involve enhanced complexity and interaction, thereby highlighting the strict connection between all types of human skills.

The main concerns being raised here have to do with employability and human functioning in complex, cosmopolitan, highly interactive organizational and professional social spheres. Instead of values and norms characterizing different cultures, communities and collective identities, the idea is that a few *universal* human properties can constitute an adequate, 'healthy' personality (De Fruyt, 2009). There are universal personal features that can foster human flourishing, helping people to achieve the most they can and to become the best they can be. And these can be measured and shaped through educational processes. Individual and collective happiness is the expected outcome of these dynamics.

As in the case of character, multiple models provide long lists of skills, based on various assumptions about human personality and its relations to the world. The synthetic conceptual framework laid out by John and De Fruyt (2015) makes an instructive example of where this is all going. They list the following areas, with inner component skills:

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[16] The relevant literature is too extended to be quoted meaningfully. See the work cited above for updated references.

(i) pursuing goals: perseverance, self-control, passion for the goal;

(ii) working with others: sociability, respect, care ('tending and befriending');

(iii) managing emotions: self-esteem, optimism, trust.

In a nutshell, the global self should be trained to react against hardships, increase his/her effort and endurance of hard work, and enhance his/her engagement with society. Happiness and multidimensional life success should be the offspring of this syndrome. Indeed, a huge lot of life outcomes are expected to depend on the enhancement of these skills, including social cohesion in multicultural societies, active citizenship, health and work related achievements, and more.

Through this conceptual framework an ambitious educational agenda replaces the exclusive focus upon standardized test results measuring learning outcomes in academic disciplines. An integral, 'durkheimian' idea of education develops into a plan of rationalization, cultivation and empowerment – of full mobilization of all human capacities.

We find ourselves here at an important cultural crossroads. The educational semantics we have outlined, respectively revolving around the concepts of character and SES, could be labeled *psycho-economic* and *ethical-culturalist*. Their divergence and convergence could be understood through the following three points:

(a) The idea of SES entails a significant shift from what was formerly the key notion of *human capital* to the centrality of social and emotional, or also 'soft' *skills* (Heckman, 2001; 2008; Heckman and Kautz, 2012). This involves passing from something one can accumulate and stock to something pertaining to the persons' agency. Skills have to do with what one can do, and they come to define what one is, in a pretty dynamic way. Furthermore, SES seem to be related to multifarious life outcomes, while human capital is typically more limited in the purposes for which it is supposed to be effective. The approach to human capacities remains basically functionalistic, but its boundaries tend to blur in terms of what contributes to 'life success' – also defined in very broad terms.

(b) The scope of what is meant by the concept of skill is overly extended, embracing both processes and outcomes, and including features as diverse as endurance, optimism, trust, open-mindedness, respect, and care for others[17]. This expansion is effectively indicated by the expression

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[17] See especially the virtuously clear version of John and De Fruyt (2015).

of 'character skills', which is sometimes used by the same authors – particularly Heckman.

(c) Table 1 shows what both semantics have in common, namely a reactive, a pro-active, and an integrative dimension. However, the ethical-culturalist one, based on the concept of character, also includes a constitutive dimension concerning 'the good', while the psycho-economic notion of SES lacks such an aspect, which is only represented by such attitudes as 'open-mindedness', 'curiosity', and the like.. To put it in Charles Taylor's words, the space in which persons move and act – practicing and testing their skills – has a definitely moral qualification. With this, their capacity to make sense of experience – and ultimately, of themselves and their personal and social condition – is enhanced by the possibility to appeal reflexively to some symbolical resources.

Table 1. SES and character as educational psycho-semantics

	Dimensions	Reactive	Pro-active	Integrative
Semantics	**Ethical-culturalist**	Resisting negative drives (normatively defined)	Attachment to a good (autonomous investment of self)	Autonomous commitment to values within a community (local, personal, etc.)
	Psycho-economic	Reacting to challenges and managing emotions (self-control)	Effort, perseverance, goal orientation	Being sociable, working with others

To sum up, the intensified reflexive focus on the human subject is producing different educational psycho-semantics. Among them, character and SES epitomize the juncture between a neo-humanistic and a mainly functionalistic view of personhood. Although these articulate different ways for human beings to make a successful way through the complex morphogenic, high speed society – that is, to flourish in such a complex environment – they also refer to similar personal properties. They obviously differ in the consideration of identity and culture, but their possible convergence still remains an interesting problem.

Character (and) skills: from divergence to integration?

The consequences of the massive social change we have described through the image of the MS include a full mobilization of personal properties and the intensive interaction between all human powers. This in turn opens the perspective of a 'post-disciplinary' way to conceive and design policies, with the hybridization of organizational forms and institutional pillars. Welfare and educational institutions make a good example (Miettinen, 2013).

Within the educational domain, such a situation evoked the problem of skills. In an important line of scientific and policy related thought, the basic idea is that given the pressure on the human being prompted by the explosion of variety and the possibilities for action and experience, we can learn our way out of such a predicament through the *acquisition of skills* and the building of a *skills society*. Such a notion is obviously complex, but its core lies in the range of skills individuals are said to need in order to meet the challenge. The emphasis falls on learning.

In the approach centred on SES the educational ideal, and indeed what makes a successful life, approaches the idea of *pure exercise*. Its subject, therefore, will be the *practising person*[18]. On the other hand, character education emphasizes cultural contents and the capacity of value commitment. The import of this divergence can be articulated in various points, which I only sketchily outline. They represent some of the key differences characterizing two possible forms of an emergent global *Bildung*:

(i) the human person can be regarded as an ideal form to be reached (a coordinated set of qualities that are to *flourish*) vs. a medium, i.e. as an active platform of powers and properties to be *enhanced* by learning;

(ii) the educational ideal can be conceived of in basic continuity vs. discontinuity with respect to the modern traditions;

(iii) the global dimension can prevail over local or national cultural traditions, thereby constituting different paths to moral universalism;

(iv) critical thinking appears in the theory as the capacity to reflexively exceed existing mainstream ideas and doctrines vs. the competence of strategic thinking and openness to new solutions to existing problems.

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[18] This expression intentionally refers to Sloterdijk's (2013) notions of practice and anthropotechnics.

Although the different meanings involved in each point are mutually related, one of them tends to be skewed towards technical competence and performance. Ultimately, lifestyle itself may be conceived of as competence and performance. Social performance involves the coordination of cognition, emotion and behaviour, which develop over time. Character emphasizes a culturally and politically active conception of the person.

Thus, it is positive that human goods and skills are not the same thing. But they are also connected, and their interaction is deeper than educational doctrines often figure. Such a consideration might be dismissed as a humanistic interference with a more dependable scientific approach. However, the whole point of these studies lies in their capacity to predict some given life outcomes – like a successful marriage, a fulfilling working life, civic engagement, social cohesion, and so forth. And all these enterprises entail a motivational energy and a meaning which will hardly come from the fascination of practice itself. Therefore, integrating character and SES, moral qualities and skills, turns out to be a meaningful task. Nevertheless, given the divergent assumptions of the two approaches, integrating them is far more challenging than simply pinpointing their differences.

Such an integration is sometimes grasped through the distinction between *moral character* and *performance character* (Elias et al., 2014, especially pp. 272-274). In its inner logic, such a distinction represents a clear example of 're-entry' – the logical move through which a distinction is reintroduced in what has been distinguished. In this particular case, the distinction between character and a performative notion of skills comes to articulate two types of character – or two aspects thereof. Moral character differs from performance character, because knowing the good is not the same as doing the good. Doing the good also requires skills. The basic idea is that social and emotional skills can be used for good or ill, but to be used for good they must be mastered well. SES are not synonymous with (good) character, but good character requires such competencies. A large number of skills are needed in order to enact shared values. People may want to do the right thing, but might not know how to do it successfully. In terms of learning, it is skills that determine how well people will be able to pick up the cues provided by educational agencies. Moreover, as Elias and colleagues point out, many of the forces at work in socializing children which are opposite to SES also tend to be opposite to character. The mass

culture pressure for short-term goal setting, impulsive behaviour, extreme and poorly managed emotions, violent problem solving, etc. make good examples.

It must be noted that the convergence we are indicating is indeed symmetrical. The reason character needs skills must be as clear as the reason SES need moral character. The former is clear enough: one may well have a concern, and care about some good, but s/he also needs to *be able* to do what must be done to pursue such a concern. The latter could be understood in terms of *motivation* and *direction*. One may well *be able to care* for other people, or *know how* to be sociable and cooperative, but could choose not to display this capacity in certain cases, if s/he believes it's not worth doing it. And things get even more intertwined: only through the actual practice of care one may come to discover the good that lies in a given relationship. This inner relationality involves more than a skill, while it may indeed reveal the latter's value and motivate efforts to achieve it. Moreover, skills require direction: «maladaptive direction, such as might come from extremist or criminal ideologies, can be pursued effectively through SEL competencies» (Elias et al., 2014, p. 286)[19]. Therefore, it is still necessary to be exposed to moral ideals.

To sum up, the focus on the 'whole child' needs both purpose and quality, meaning and effectiveness, process and content. This can only be achieved through a comprehensive system of socialization, in which the totality of supportive factors, environments, conditions and processes work together to build a personal profile, not just a set of skills directly connected with explicit programs.

For this reasons, it doesn't seem ill-founded to claim that character education and SES are moving towards a convergence some authors have described as inexorable and long overdue. It is, however, challenging to spell out a *processual view* of this allegedly necessary connection. Although several streams of influence are mentioned in the literature which are deemed essential for their intertwining pathways with moral and character education, neither seems to be easily integrated into a consistent model of how character and SES emerge over time, both at the individual and the collective level. This task could be understood as the educational

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[19] The expression 'SEL' in the quotation above stands for 'social and emotional learning', which we can well regard as equivalent to SES, only pointing to the learning process instead of the skills acquired.

companion of a more general cultural, indeed civilizational agenda. The latter consists of finding mediating processes to build moral universalism in and through particularities, and to develop culturally qualified pathways to create globalized social environments.

What I can do here is just move a preliminary step in that direction. Its significance lies in illustrating a possible way to argue for an integrated model, not in presenting a presumably complete instance of such a model.

First, we must recall the formal definition of character as comprising the capacity of resistance, or to delay gratification, attachment to the good and moral autonomy. My thesis is that such a notion is matched in the social sciences by Archer's theory of reflexive socialization (Archer, 2000; 2003).

Let us sketchily outline the key points of such a way to conceive of socialization. Archer's realist morphogenetic theory formulates the problem in pretty innovative terms, proposing an ontologically stratified, dynamic, and connective theory of the human being and of his/her relationship with the social domain. I'll just indicate the crucial steps:

(1)   the human being emerges through relationships with various layers of reality: nature, practice and society, developing in the first place a *continual sense of self* which is not socially derived;

(2)   *practical relations* have priority, and play a pivotal role in constituting the primary identity of the self and its fundamental categories;

(3)   the process of *personification* then undergoes various stages, and finally gets to constitute a personal identity and social identity;

(4)   the basic operators in this process are the personal emergent properties (PEP), both first order – *emotions* – and second order – i.e. *internal conversation* as the bulk of human *reflexivity*;

(5)   these PEP emerge as an outcome of human relations with the three layers of reality, since these generate care or *concerns*; the order established among these defines what people care about most, the 'exchange rates' among various possible courses of action, ending up with the establishment of a person's own *modus vivendi*, that is the way people inhabit this world, which is unique to each;

(6)   such a process has discernment, deliberation and dedication as its focal points. They consist of reflecting upon various possibilities of action and experience, deciding how to prioritize things and domains of personal investment, and translating one's decision into an adequate life plan, and follow it through related practices.

What we see here is a stratified concept of agency and the person, based on the notion of the *human experience of reality*, both social and non-social. Such an experience is a relation with nature, practice, and society, and is *mediated* by our PEP – which in turn are *not* pre-established, but emerge through that very relation. Emotions are the first commentaries we make on the reality we experience. Later we *reflect* upon them, fixing our priorities and thereby establishing an order in our way to relate to the various aspects of reality. This entails a decision about what our ultimate concern is, and how the other concerns that inevitably emerge from our relations with the world can dovetail with it. The relatively stable outcome of this reflexive operation is called the *modus vivendi* we establish with the world, namely our existential plan. Ultimate concerns, therefore, establish a *meaningful relation between the world as it is and our plans for life*. And it is only through this relation that our plans and the practices through which we want to enact them can come to being and find concrete realization. From these plans in turn depends the way we 'make our way through the world', going through different social contexts, structures, and roles.

This view clearly has multiple and far-reaching implications. Three of them are particularly relevant in the present context. First, the link between individual and society and its mediation take place *in a connective way*. The dreams, concerns, and life plans of human beings are the *locus* where social conditionings receive their "specific weight", as well as specifically human "replies". Thus, human beings "count" for society, not only as numbers or as the necessary support of communication, and not even as bearers of "internalized" ideas and values they are not aware of or do not control anyway. Archer has conceived of a systematic way to show how this happens and is integrated in the process of socio-cultural morphogenesis. Secondly, the human / social connection *is not a conflationary one*, since human identity is not swallowed by the social domain, is not the gift of society. Finally, realist social theory argues that *evaluation*, in a broad sense of the word, represents *the basic existential attitude* characterising the human condition in the world[20]. This point finds expression in the crucial concept of *concern* (*Sorge*), which bears a double meaning: what inescapably concerns us, calls for our attention and presses us to deal with it (something we cannot simply ignore), and what we care about, what we are ideally engaged in. We can summarize both meanings

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[20] This point is also systematically treated by Andrew Sayer (Sayer, 2011).

by defining concern as 'what is urging us'. What is important here is to mark the distance of this perspective from the economic-instrumental semantics of interest. It is concern – and the whole reflexive process revolving around it – that ultimately defines personal and social identity, as a hard and provisional achievement, ever subject to reflexive monitoring and revision.

Even this overly quick summary should demonstrate that a non-reductionist model of socialization and identity building can accommodate the idea of a self that is constituted in moral space, and the related notion of character[21]. The reason to see this correspondence is that the elements of character are human properties, without which Archer's theorized socialization process would not find an adequate subject to enact it. At the same time, such a socialization theory shows how character can emerge as a result of social and practical relationships, thereby explaining its dynamics. In a nutshell, people without character could not successfully go through reflexive socialization, while reflexive socialization provides a sound social scientific ground for the emergence of character. This remark is not meant to establish any pointless circularity. We should here remember that Archer's morphogenesis of the self works both as a model of the first emergence of consistent selfhood and as a framework for the ongoing reflexive life of the subject over the life course.

In other terms, we could conclude that character constitutes the integrated set of personal properties which qualify a personal *modus vivendi* in moral perspective, as the emergent outcome of a reflexive way to shape one's relations to the world. In a nutshell, character might be a conceptual element in a 'sociology of concern', which studies the morphogenesis of personal and social identity, conceptualized as the development of a *modus vivendi* – that is, of a particular way of being-in-the-world. Arguably, different types of *modus vivendi* are conducive to – and in turn require the development of – different kinds of character. This holds the promise of the integration of character within social scientific views of the human person. A further theoretical move is needed to specify how SES development must parallel this developmental model, in order to sustain the process of identification, attachment to and pursuit of meaningful goals effectively. One interesting perspective comes from the

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[21] This means that Taylor's claim about the inherent reductionism of the sociological approaches to identity can both inspire Archer's theory and be challenged by it.

theories which apply neuropsychological research to address the development of moral personhood. For example, the theory of adaptive ethical expertise discussed by Narvaez and Bock (2014) looks at ethical attitudes and behaviours *as a competence*. Such an *ethical expertise* is articulated into four processes, in which moral experts are supposed to be highly competent. These are ethical sensitivity, ethical judgement, ethical focus, and ethical action. As for all expertise, these dimensions can be further analyzed in their component skills (see table 2 below).

What is interesting here is that we could establish some correspondence between these dimensions of ethical expertise and the phases of the reflexive process of emergence of personal and social identity. Experts in ethical sensitivity are good at quickly and thoroughly discerning the moral nature of a situation, and the role they could play in it. That's a perceptual skill, which may stand in a complementary relation with the moment of 'discernment' in Archer's model, because such a skill could influence the way people reflect upon their emotions and develop the right moral intuitions in relation to such emotional responses. It could even influence the emotional response in the first place – in the same way a cultivated taste for refined food guides our spontaneous response to different kinds of food (e.g. junk food). Expertise in ethical judgement can be connected with the moment of deliberation, while expertise in moral action resonates with dedication. Moral focus could correspond to the basic desire for acting morally, or to the capacity of commitment.

Table 2. The articulation of moral expertise

Ethical sensitivity	*Ethical judgment*	*Ethical focus*	*Ethical action*
Expand emotional expression	Understand ethical problems	Respecting others	Resolving conflicts and problems
Take perspectives of others	Using codes and identifying judgment criteria	Help others	Assert respectfully
Accepting diversity	Reasoning critically	Being a community member	Taking initiative as a leader
Listening to others	Reasoning ethically	Develop conscience	Planning to implement decisions
Communicating well	Understand consequences	Search for meaning in life	Cultivate courage
Understanding situations	Reflect on process and outcome	Respecting traditions and institutions	Persevering
Rejecting social bias	Coping and resiliency	Developing ethical identity and integrity	Working hard

Source: adaptation from Narvaez, Bock (2014), p. 143

Therefore, it is somewhat implied in the general orientation to a concern-oriented way of acting and thinking. In other words, the process of discernment, deliberation, and dedication comes to be ethically qualified insofar as it is performed with the help of this expertise – itself a personal property of individuals. Moral action emerges from the relationships between these properties of persons. The skills listed in Table 2 could be said to be necessary for people to perform successfully in each stage of the process, and in turn they are reinforced by the same ongoing process. This establishes a comprehensive, psycho-sociological model of the emergence of personal identity and moral personhood.

Education can target these skills, both through the immersion of subjects in a relevant domain and through the presentation of rational explanations for actions and decisions in given situations.

The argument I have presented here was not meant to be more than the suggestion of a possible way to develop an integrated approach, which looks at the contribution of various disciplines and approaches, while keeping humanistic concerns as a major compass. More analytical and more advanced work must follow up. However, it is clear that self-formation and the forms of personal and social life which will develop as a creative-and-adaptive response to the turbulent dynamics of boundless morphogenesis will be contingent upon the development of such complex, non-reductionist approaches. The dilemmas, and the possible ways out, that have been outlined here point to a way to connect persons, culture and society in such a way that none can be reduced to the others, and that the relations-and-distinctions between them still design a viable space for humans to inhabit.

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