

INTERVIEW WITH JAMES ARTHUR, PROFESSOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM



Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “I like the quotation: *“We must acknowledge ... that the most important, indeed the only, thing we have to offer our students is ourselves. Everything else they can read in a book”*... Role modelling is a powerful teaching tool for passing on knowledge, skills, and values and I have always believed that you must make explicit what is implicit in your teaching.”
- “A recent story was when I met the Queen who awarded me the title Officer of the British Empire – she asked me *“How does one measure character”* – I responded, *“Your Majesty, one does not measure character, one recognises it.”* She was amused!”

Would you describe your work, and some of the particularities of your university?

I work within The University of Birmingham which is a public research university located in Birmingham, United Kingdom. It received its royal charter in 1900 as a successor to Queen's College, Birmingham (founded in 1825), making it the first English civic university to receive its own royal charter.

The university is a founding member of both the Russell Group of British research universities and the international network of research universities, Universitas 21.

The student population includes 23,155 undergraduate and 12,605 postgraduate students, which is the 7th largest in the UK (out of 169). The annual income of the institution for 2019–20 was £737.3 million.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, James Arthur, Professor at the University of Birmingham, shares insights about the work that he received an Expanded Reason Award for and about life in academia, with a particular emphasis on his research for the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues.

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What is your main field of research, and why did you choose that field?

My first degree was in history from the University of Birmingham, which I attended at the age of 17, but I have also studied theology, education and philosophy at the University of Oxford where I gained my masters and doctorate. I have worked principally in the field of educational research because I began my career as a history teacher, which I believed I was called to be.

I came to realise that education should aim to form people so they can live well in a world worth living in. The goal of human life is to develop its essential excellences, the potentialities that define and constitute it. In education today there is an ever-increasing anxiety—an anxiety which emphasizes student success as the end all and be all of education. Our educational system has been shaped by the idea that the purpose of human beings is to produce and consume in the marketplace, and that the measure of all things is success in the marketplace—profitability, or in the case of an individual, his or her wealth and status. We have a responsibility to challenge this narrow and mistaken view of human life.

You are a recipient of the Expanded Reason Awards. What was your contribution for receiving the Award?

The Award was made for an amalgam of projects, summarised under the title *Teaching Character Virtues – A Neo-Aristotelian Approach*, which captures the multiple teaching programmes I initiated in the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, at the University of Birmingham. These programmes range from the internationally-recognised *A Framework for Character Education in Schools*, to the world's first distance-learning Master's degree in character education. I promoted a neo-Aristotelian approach to virtue and character formation and, with the Jubilee Centre's staff, continue to undertake world-leading research in character and virtues that guides practice and informs policy.

The Jubilee Centre was launched in May 2012. The research undertaken by the Jubilee Centre is summarised in the online exhibition [The Jubilee Journey: Celebrating research into character and virtues](#).

How easy or difficult is it for you to share your values with students when teaching?

I like the quotation: “*We must acknowledge ... that the most important, indeed the only, thing we have to offer our students is ourselves. Everything else they can read in a book.*”

I think it is impossible not to pass on the values that we hold and display in what we do. Role modelling is a powerful teaching tool for passing on knowledge, skills, and values and I have always believed that you must make explicit what is implicit in your teaching. I do not consider it to be difficult because it is who you are when you teach. Students are always curious what the teacher thinks. However I do not want my students to simply think what I think, but to be authentic thinkers.

How do your values affect your research? And what are some challenges you face?

My values influence my research approach. Research needs to seek the truth and I do not exclude any aspect of who I am in this search. While I teach in a secular university, I do not, for example, exclude theological insights from my research.

There are many values that are influential in shaping the norms that constitute research practices. Often academics are not conscious of them. Six are often mentioned:

- Objectivity
- Honesty
- Openness
- Accountability
- Fairness
- Stewardship

Most academics, as I do, will subscribe to these values. However, I am increasingly conscious that Universities have trouble defining the Human. This is particularly important to my research which focuses on character formation for a life of flourishing.

Since flourishing entails a virtuous life, it cannot be divorced from the community in which we are part. We are not only rational and ethical beings; we are also social and political beings. Solitary or individualistic approaches to ethical thinking lack elements essential to the telos. We only flourish as individuals in relationship, and therefore the telos includes both individual and societal dimensions. The telos of a human being is to live a life worth living. A life worth living is living a good life, which is a life lived according to the virtues. The telos in this life is found in common projects, shared activities and intimate relationships. Individuals need other individuals in order to become what they are as human beings. We need others to be truly ourselves.

What is your advice for students who may be Catholic are contemplating doing graduate work or a PhD?

Resist the nonsense! Seriously, as a doctoral student we experience much that will challenge us both in the supervision session and in the bar with fellow students. Much of this is good for us. We need challenge. However, it is important to separate out that which is true and that which is false, even when sincerely said.

Could you share how you ended up in your current position, what was your personal journey?

I attended a Catholic boy's school in Scotland and moved to England. I joined the Jesuits as a novice, but left to become a history teacher. My schooling, novitiate, and teaching experience were the three most powerful formative experiences in my life... Strange that my

University experience was less formative. I was made a professor in my 30s and have been in leadership positions in Universities ever since. I have been offered very senior positions, but have declined them to pursue my work on virtue ethics. Nevertheless, I have been Dean and a Pro Vice Chancellor of my current University.

Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about yourself, what you are passionate about?

I am passionate about reading and travel. A recent story was when I met the Queen who awarded me the title Officer of the British Empire – she asked me *“How does one measure character”* – I responded, *“Your Majesty, one does not measure character, one recognises it.”* She was amused!



Photo: Professor James Arthur receiving the OBE from the Queen.