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THE FORMATION OF THE YOUNG PERSON: A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT

The formation of the young person is often divided among separate fields, cognitive development left to psychology, moral instruction to the family, social integration to schools, so that no one asks what the young person is ultimately becoming. This study examines the tendency to reduce that process to acquiring information, credentials, and approved behaviour, without asking whether the young person is thereby becoming capable of knowing truth, choosing the good, exercising freedom responsibly, relating meaningfully to others, and finding a purposeful direction for life. Using conceptual analysis to clarify terms such as freedom and virtue, philosophical interpretation of classical and contemporary sources on human development, and normative reasoning about what this growth ought to involve, the study examines how reason, freedom, virtue, identity, relationship, and purpose together constitute authentic development. It argues that the young person is not a finished product to be filled with content but an unfinished, purposeful being who must gradually author their own becoming, supported rather than replaced by family, school, and culture. Engagement with classical resources on reason, freedom, and virtue, alongside contemporary scholarship on identity, character, and meaning, supports an integrated model oriented toward the whole person rather than isolated competencies. The discussion concludes that the central task facing families, educators, and cultures today is to help the young person move beyond information and performance toward self-understanding, responsible freedom, and purposeful direction, amid digital, cultural, and social conditions that increasingly fragment this process.

Keywords: *human formation, philosophy of education, youth identity, freedom and responsibility, virtue and character, meaning and purpose*

Introduction

Human beings are not born already formed; what they become depends on the formation they receive from family, school, culture, and their own choices. Formation, philosophically understood, is more demanding than instruction or socialisation; it is the gradual shaping of intellect, will, character, and relationships so that a person becomes able to know truth, choose the good, and direct life toward worthwhile ends. Throughout this article, the phrase young person refers primarily to adolescents and emerging adults, roughly individuals in the second and third decades of life, for whom identity, values, and life direction remain substantially open to formation rather than settled. Education, broadly understood as a process of human formation, lies at the centre of human life, since education bears directly

on the formation of mind and the cultivation of moral vision, and questions about its purpose cannot be separated from what a human being is meant to become (Bakhurst, 2020).

The young person occupies a distinctive position within this process. Adolescence and emerging adulthood are periods of active construction of identity, values, and direction, marked by both vulnerability and possibility, with the search for meaning treated as a core developmental task (Czyzowska, 2021). Psychological and sociological accounts can describe how young people develop, but cannot settle the normative question of what they ought to become, nor clarify truth, freedom, virtue, and purpose, tasks proper to philosophical reflection.

The central question, then, is not how young people develop but what kind of person they should become. The contribution of this article is to organise that question around six interdependent dimensions of formation, namely reason, freedom, virtue, identity, relationship, and purpose, treating each as necessary but, on its own, insufficient for a young person to become a full human subject. This inquiry draws on Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Dewey, Buber, Frankl, Stein, and Maritain, alongside contemporary scholarship, to construct an integrated account of formation centred on these six dimensions.

Understanding the Young Person: A Philosophical Perspective

Any coherent account of formation depends on a prior account of what is being formed. Philosophically, the young person is best understood neither as a set of behaviours to be managed nor as an empty vessel to be filled, but as a rational and free being, a subject capable of understanding reasons, weighing alternatives, and directing their own action. Aristotle's classical description of the human being as a rational animal remains significant here, not because it functions as a piece of current empirical evidence, but because it names a capacity that contemporary accounts of intellectual autonomy and epistemic responsibility continue to presuppose (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./2009). Recent work in the epistemology of education proposes that a central goal of education is to develop the student's intellectual character, and thus the intellectual virtues, together with the intellectual self-confidence to hold beliefs with conviction (Pritchard, 2020); such a goal presupposes the disposition to take responsibility for one's own beliefs rather than accepting them passively from others. This rational and free capacity is inseparable from human dignity. Personalist thought, developed influentially by Maritain and Stein, insists that the human person possesses an interiority and worth that cannot be reduced to social utility, economic productivity, or measurable performance (Maritain, 1943; Stein, 1917/1989). Contemporary discussions of the aims of higher education echo this insistence when they argue that the intrinsic purpose of higher education lies in the transformation of the student through engagement with disciplinary knowledge, a purpose that is costly to neglect even when institutions are under pressure to prioritise narrower, more measurable outcomes (Ashwin, 2020). Understood in this light, the young person is best described through the philosophical

distinction between becoming and merely having. A young person can accumulate possessions, credentials, followers, and information without thereby becoming a more integrated or mature person; conversely, the process of becoming a person, in the fullest sense, concerns the interior ordering of one's capacities toward truth and goodness, not merely the external accumulation of resources.

Meaning and Purpose of Human Formation

Formation, properly understood, extends well beyond academic education. Academic education is principally concerned with the transmission and mastery of a body of knowledge or skill; formation is concerned with the shaping of the person who receives that knowledge, so that its possession contributes to the person's overall growth rather than remaining an external addition. This is why formation must be understood as intellectual, moral, emotional, and social at once. Intellectual formation concerns the capacity to know and evaluate truth; moral formation concerns the capacity to choose and enact the good; emotional formation concerns the capacity to experience, interpret, and regulate one's inner life in a way that supports rather than undermines good action; and social formation concerns the capacity to relate to others with respect, honesty, and care; together these belong to what philosophers of education describe as the formation of mind and the cultivation of moral vision (Bakhurst, 2020).

These dimensions cannot be pursued in isolation without producing a fragmented person. A young person who is intellectually sophisticated but morally uncultivated, or emotionally expressive but socially inconsiderate, has not been formed as a whole person but only developed along a single axis. The philosophical tradition running from Aristotle's account of the unity of the virtues to contemporary personalist and relational accounts of education converges on the claim that authentic formation must attend to the whole person, treating intellectual, moral, emotional, and social growth as interdependent rather than separable projects.

It is on this basis that formation must be distinguished from information and from education narrowly conceived. Information is the possession of facts; education, in its narrower institutional sense, commonly refers to the organised teaching and learning of knowledge, skills, and dispositions within formal or structured settings; formation is the interior transformation of the person that education, at its best, is meant to serve. A broad contemporary account of the aims of education recognises exactly this distinction when it frames the central question of education not as a matter of curriculum design alone, but as the deeper question of what education is for, situating specific policies and practices within a wider account of human flourishing (Kitcher, 2021).

This distinction can be sharpened further by separating formation from mere instruction and socialisation. Instruction is the deliberate transmission of a specific skill or item of content, judged successful when the learner can reliably reproduce or apply it; socialisation is the process by which a person internalises the norms, roles, and expectations of a given group so as to function acceptably within it. Both are

necessary and, within their own terms, legitimate. However, a person can be thoroughly instructed and successfully socialised, able to perform required tasks and conform smoothly to social expectations, without being genuinely formed in the sense argued for here, because instruction and socialisation aim at competent performance and social fit, whereas formation aims at the interior ordering of a person's reason, will, and character toward truth and goodness for their own sake. A well-socialised young person may simply have learned which opinions to voice and which appetites to restrain in order to be accepted; a formed young person has come to understand why those opinions are true or those restraints good, and would continue to hold them even where social approval no longer required it. Formation is measured by a growing capacity for autonomous, truth-oriented judgement, not merely by outward conformity to instruction received or norms absorbed, since teaching that forms a person is, on this view, internal to human freedom (Rödl, 2020).

The Role of Reason in the Formation of the Young Person

Reason occupies a central place in the formation of the young person because it is through reason that the person comes to know the truth about the world, about others, and about themselves. The Socratic practice of relentless questioning, and the Platonic image of turning the soul away from illusion toward the light of truth, remain philosophically instructive precisely because they describe formation as a movement from unexamined opinion toward disciplined understanding (Plato, ca. 375 B.C.E./1992). This movement requires the deliberate cultivation of critical and reflective thinking, not simply the accumulation of facts.

Contemporary scholarship confirms the practical urgency of this classical insight. Content analyses of moral education research, including a review of five decades of scholarship in a leading moral education journal, show how the field has broadened its topics and methods in studying how the capacity for ethical reasoning develops and can be supported through education (Lee, 2022). At the same time, contemporary critical pedagogy warns of the danger of uncritical conformity, in which schooling produces technically competent but intellectually passive young people who accept received opinion without examination. Writing on critical pedagogy, Giroux argues that education should cultivate the capacity to question dominant narratives and resist forms of manufactured ignorance that discourage independent thought (Giroux, 2020).

Philosophy, understood as a discipline and as a habit of mind, offers a particularly apt instrument of intellectual formation because it trains the young person to ask fundamental questions rather than accept fundamental answers uncritically. A young person formed philosophically becomes, in the fullest sense, a questioning and thinking subject: one who does not merely receive knowledge passively but actively interrogates, evaluates, and appropriates it, thereby making it genuinely their own rather than a borrowed possession.

Freedom and Responsibility

Freedom is frequently reduced, in everyday usage, to the mere ability to choose among available options. Philosophically, this reduction is inadequate. Kant's account of

autonomy insists that genuine freedom consists not simply in the absence of external constraint, but in the capacity of the rational will to give itself a law and to act in accordance with that self-given law rather than mere impulse or external pressure (Kant, 1785/2012). Freedom, on this understanding, is inseparable from responsibility, since to be free is to be answerable for the direction one gives to one's own life and to the lives of others one's choices affect.

This philosophical account has direct implications for the formation of conscience in the young person. Conscience is not an innate faculty that simply announces right and wrong without cultivation; it must be formed through reflection, dialogue, and the internalisation of sound moral reasoning, so that the young person becomes capable of judging their own actions rather than depending entirely on external approval or sanction. Recent critical pedagogy literature reinforces this point when it argues that education for genuine freedom must actively resist the cultivation of passivity and manufactured ignorance, since a young person trained merely to comply with authority, however benign, has not thereby been formed in responsible freedom but only in obedience (Giroux, 2022).

The consequences of choices made during youth are rarely confined to the moment of choice; they accumulate into habits, relationships, and life trajectories that shape the adult the young person is becoming. A philosophically adequate account of freedom must therefore hold together two claims that are sometimes falsely opposed: that the young person possesses a genuine capacity for self-determination that adults must respect, and that this capacity is exercised responsibly only to the extent that it has been properly formed through guidance, reflection, and the gradual internalisation of sound judgement.

Moral and Character Formation

Virtue, in the classical Aristotelian sense, names a stable disposition of character that enables a person to act well consistently, rather than only occasionally or accidentally (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./2009). Aristotle's insight that virtue is acquired through the repeated practice of good action, so that right conduct gradually becomes second nature, continues to inform contemporary character education, which likewise treats moral formation as the cultivation of durable habits rather than the memorisation of rules. A recent framework for character education in schools explicitly organises moral formation around the deliberate cultivation of habits and dispositions such as courage, honesty, self-control, and compassion, treating these not as abstract ideals but as practical competencies to be developed through guided practice and reflection (Thompson, 2022).

This emphasis on habituation does not mean that character formation is free of philosophical difficulty. Contemporary philosophy of education has raised searching questions about the coherence and stability of virtue as an educational aim, noting that dispositions which appear stable in one context can prove unexpectedly fragile under different social pressures, which suggests that character education must attend as much to the situational and relational conditions that support or undermine virtuous action as to the cultivation of the individual disposition itself (Smith, 2022). Related scholarship has

explored the practical value of dialogue as a tool for moral education, showing that teachers' contextual questioning in discussions of moral dilemmas, such as posing hypothetical questions, asking students to switch roles, and playing devil's advocate, helps to enhance students' thinking about difficult cases (Wong, 2021), while other recent work has developed a neo-Aristotelian conception of flourishing as the overarching aim of education, one that can guide the design and evaluation of programmes intended to form character in young people (Kristjánsson, 2020).

Character formation of this kind requires discipline and self-control, understood not as external repression but as the young person's growing capacity to govern their own impulses in light of reasoned judgement about what is genuinely good. Integrity, honesty, courage, and compassion function as interconnected virtues rather than isolated traits, since a person who is honest without courage will often fail to speak the truth when it is costly, and a person who is compassionate without integrity will often distort the truth to spare feelings. The decisive movement in moral formation is the young person's gradual shift from asking only what can I do, a question of mere capability or permission, to asking what ought I to do, a question that presupposes a genuine concern for the good and for the wellbeing of others.

Influence of Society and Culture

No young person is formed in isolation. The family remains the first and, in most cases, the most formative environment of a young person's life, since it is within the family that the young person first experiences love, discipline, language, and the basic patterns of relationship that will shape later expectations of other people and institutions. Schools and other educational institutions extend and, ideally, refine this early formation, offering structured opportunities for intellectual and moral development that families alone cannot provide, while peer relationships introduce the young person to the demands and rewards of belonging to a community of equals, with all the pressure toward conformity and the possibility of genuine friendship that such belonging involves.

Contemporary culture adds a further, distinctive layer to this formative environment through digital media. Recent psychological work on adolescent identity treats digital media not as a marginal or purely recreational activity, but as part of a hybrid reality that links digital spaces to offline contexts, so that identity development online is continuous with, rather than separate from, identity development offline (Granic et al., 2020). Complementary research on adolescent mental health in the digital age documents that adolescents are spending an increasing amount of their time online and connected to one another through digital technologies, which means that any adequate account of contemporary formation must treat digital experience as a primary rather than incidental influence (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). This digital and cultural environment is strongly influenced by consumerism and celebrity culture, which tend to present worth and success in terms of visibility, possession, and image rather than in terms of virtue, truth, or genuine relationship. The challenge this poses for authentic identity formation is considerable, since a young person immersed in a culture of constant comparison and curated self-presentation may come to measure their own

value by external and largely superficial standards, rather than developing the interior self-knowledge that philosophical formation requires. Forming an authentic identity within a culture as fragmented as this does not require withdrawing from that culture altogether, since such withdrawal is neither realistically possible nor genuinely desirable for a young person who must still live, study, and relate within it. What is required instead is the deliberate cultivation of the critical and reflective capacities discussed above, capacities that allow the young person to examine, question, and evaluate the images, values, and pressures culture presents rather than absorbing them uncritically. Formed in this way, the young person becomes able to engage actively with culture, drawing selectively from it, rather than being passively and simply shaped by it, thereby preserving genuine agency in the ongoing process of identity formation.

Identity, Meaning, and Purpose

The young person's search for identity is not merely a psychological stage to be passed through but a properly philosophical task, since the question who am I cannot be answered by external description alone; it requires the young person to take up, interpret, and evaluate their own history, relationships, and values from the inside. Closely related to this question is the forward-looking question of what am I becoming, which reframes identity not as a fixed possession but as a trajectory, a direction of growth that the young person is actively shaping through the choices already discussed in relation to freedom and character. Identity and values are, on this account, mutually constitutive rather than independent: the values a young person comes to hold shape the identity the young person forms, while the identity already formed shapes which values feel compelling or worth pursuing further. This is why the search for meaning cannot be separated from the search for identity. Recent developmental research treats the search for meaning as one of the central developmental tasks of adolescence and emerging adulthood, associating a stable sense of meaning with better mental health and associating its absence with heightened vulnerability in a period during which, as broader epidemiological research indicates, many mental disorders commonly first emerge (Czyzowska, 2021; Solmi et al., 2022).

Purpose gives this search for meaning a concrete direction. Recent research on adolescents confirms that a stronger presence of meaning in life is associated with lower symptoms of depression and anxiety (Chen et al., 2021), functioning as a psychological resource that helps young people interpret setbacks within a longer-term framework of goals rather than as evidence of failure, while longitudinal work shows that strengthening purpose over the course of adolescence predicts greater life satisfaction and fewer depressive symptoms, a pattern consistent with the view that purpose orients the young person's attention beyond immediate difficulty toward a chosen and valued direction for life (Chen & Cheng, 2020). Frankl's philosophical insistence that human beings are sustained less by pleasure than by a sense of meaning finds, in this contemporary research, a striking empirical echo, suggesting that the philosophical and psychological accounts of purposeful formation are not opposed but mutually reinforcing (Frankl, 1946/2006).

Education and the Formation of the Person

The distinction between education and formation established earlier carries direct implications for how education is practised. Dewey's insistence that genuine education arises from experience that has been actively reflected upon, rather than from the passive reception of ready-made conclusions, shows concretely what formation demands of teaching and curriculum alike (Dewey, 1938), a view reinforced by recent philosophy of education, which continues to argue that education bears on the formation of mind and the cultivation of moral vision, and so belongs at the very centre of any adequate account of human life, rather than being treated as one applied topic among many (Bakhurst, 2020). Understood in this way, the teacher functions not merely as a transmitter of information but as a formator, one who accompanies the young person's intellectual and moral development through example, dialogue, and patient correction. Buber's philosophy of relationship is instructive here, since it distinguishes an I-Thou relation, in which the other is encountered as a full subject worthy of genuine dialogue, from an I-It relation, in which the other is treated merely as an object to be used or managed (Buber, 1923/1970); a teacher who relates to students only in the second mode can transmit information but cannot form persons. Dialogue, questioning, and reflection, of the kind examined in contemporary classroom research on moral discussion, remain the principal pedagogical tools through which this formative, person-to-person relationship is exercised in practice (Wong, 2021).

Education conceived as formation is also inseparable from the preparation of the young person for freedom and responsible citizenship, since a society composed of technically skilled but intellectually passive citizens is poorly equipped to sustain genuine democratic deliberation. A philosophical model of person-centred education, already anticipated in Maritain's account of education as the formation of a free and responsible human person rather than the production of a trained specialist (Maritain, 1943), therefore seeks to help the young person become, through the entire experience of schooling, a more integrated, truthful, free, and relationally mature person rather than merely a more credentialed one.

Towards an Integrated Philosophy of Youth Formation

As indicated in the introduction, authentic formation cannot be reduced to any single dimension, whether intellectual, moral, or social, but must instead be understood as an integrated whole composed of six interdependent principles, summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Six Interdependent Dimensions of Youth Formation

Dimension	What It Concerns
1. Reason	The growing capacity to seek and recognise truth through disciplined, critical thinking rather than passive acceptance of received opinion.
2. Virtue	The cultivation of stable character traits, such as honesty, courage, self-control, and compassion, through guided habituation and reflective practice.
3. Freedom	The growing capacity to choose responsibly, understanding freedom not as mere absence of constraint but as the exercise of a rational will answerable for its own choices.
4. Identity	Growing self-understanding, achieved through the same critical and reflective capacities cultivated intellectually, turned toward the interpretation of one's own history, values, and direction of growth.
5. Relationship	The growing capacity for solidarity and respect, understood through genuine dialogical encounter rather than the merely instrumental treatment of others.
6. Purpose	The discovery of a meaningful and worthwhile direction for life, closely associated with psychological wellbeing and resilience.

Source: Author's synthesis.

The formation of the mind concerns the young person's growing capacity to seek and recognise truth through disciplined, critical thinking rather than passive acceptance of received opinion, a capacity that both classical philosophy and contemporary work on intellectual character treat as a central educational aim (Pritchard, 2020). Built upon this intellectual foundation, the formation of character concerns the cultivation of stable virtues, such as honesty, courage, self-control, and compassion, through guided habituation and reflective practice, integrated by practical wisdom, as recent frameworks for character education continue to recommend (Smith, 2022). The formation of freedom concerns the young person's growing capacity to choose responsibly, understanding freedom not as mere absence of constraint but as the exercise of a rational will answerable for its own choices, a capacity cultivated relationally rather than in isolation, and one that is undermined wherever education cultivates passivity or manufactured conformity rather than genuine autonomy (Giroux, 2022). The formation of identity concerns the young person's growing self-understanding, achieved through the same critical and reflective capacities cultivated intellectually, but now turned toward the interpretation of one's own history, values, and direction of growth, particularly in a digital and cultural environment that constantly proposes external and often superficial measures of worth (Granic et al., 2020). The formation of relationships concerns the young person's growing capacity for solidarity and respect, understood through Buber's distinction between genuine dialogical encounter and the merely instrumental treatment of others. The formation of purpose concerns the young

person's discovery of a meaningful and worthwhile direction for life, a discovery that contemporary research confirms is closely associated with psychological wellbeing and resilience during a developmentally vulnerable period of life (Czyżowska, 2021; Chen et al., 2021). None of these six dimensions is sufficient alone; each corrects the deformations to which the others, pursued in isolation, are prone. Intellect without character produces cleverness without wisdom; character without freedom produces mere conformity to imposed rules rather than genuine virtue; freedom without relationship produces isolated autonomy indistinguishable from license; and none of the above, without purpose, gives the young person any answer to the question of why formation matters at all.

Challenges to the Formation of the Young Person Today

Several features of contemporary society complicate this process. Relativism and widespread uncertainty about values leave many young people without a stable framework within which to evaluate competing claims about the good life, so that intellectual formation becomes considerably harder to achieve when the very possibility of objective moral truth is culturally contested. Peer pressure can further intensify these difficulties, since the dynamics of comparison and belonging operate powerfully within adolescent social groups. The loss of meaningful role models, whether within families, schools, or public life, deprives young people of concrete examples of the virtues that character formation is meant to cultivate, leaving abstract moral instruction without the lived embodiment that habituation, on the Aristotelian model, actually requires. Educational systems themselves are not exempt from these pressures. Systems focused excessively on certificates and employability risk collapsing the broader aim of formation into narrower economic outcomes, treating young people primarily as future workers rather than as persons in the process of becoming, a tendency recent philosophy of education continues to challenge by insisting that the deeper question of what education is for cannot be answered by economic considerations alone (Kitcher, 2021). Finally, contemporary formation must navigate a genuine tension between individual freedom and social responsibility, since a culture that celebrates self-expression without correspondingly cultivating responsibility risks producing young people who are free in a merely formal sense but poorly equipped for the demands of genuine relationship and civic life, a risk heightened wherever the vulnerabilities of adolescence, a developmental window in which most lifetime mental disorders first emerge, are left unaddressed (Solmi et al., 2022).

Conclusion

This inquiry has argued that a young person's growth cannot be captured by any single measure of success, whether academic achievement, technical competence, or social conformity, but must instead be understood as a unified process unfolding across six interdependent dimensions. Reason orients the young person toward truth rather than mere information; freedom is genuine only when exercised responsibly rather than merely permitted; virtue stabilises good action into settled character rather than isolated compliance; identity is achieved

through honest self-interpretation rather than received from external image; relationship shapes the young person through genuine dialogical encounter rather than the instrumental use of others; and purpose gives direction and resilience to the whole by situating present choices within a meaningful trajectory for life. None of these, taken alone, is sufficient; each depends on and reinforces the others, so that a deficiency in one, an unformed conscience, say, or an absence of purpose, tends over time to weaken the rest. Authentic growth, on this account, addresses the whole person, refusing the substitution of a single measurable outcome for the far more demanding task of helping the young person become fully human. Education, in this light, should ultimately help the young person work toward three questions that recur throughout this inquiry in different forms: who am I, a question of honest self-understanding; what kind of person should I become, a question of character and freedom; and what is the purpose of my life, a question of meaning and direction.

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