

### Cultivating Radical Hope in the Face of Climate Collapse

Climate change might bring about the end of the western industrial lifestyle this century (Bendell, 2020; IPCC, 2021). Increasing levels of eco-anxiety (Baudon & Jachens, 2021) suggest a growing awareness of this possibility. Character education, which aims to help young people develop virtues (Jubilee Centre, 2022), must therefore address two key questions:

1. Which virtue is required to face the possibility that one's way of life may end? (I will denote this possibility " $P_{end}$ ".)
2. How might this virtue be cultivated in young people?

Taking the step from habituated virtue to full virtue requires *phronesis*; in particular, it requires a *general blueprint* of flourishing, which includes an agent's ethical aims and aspirations (Kristjánsson, 2017; Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2024). When confronted with  $P_{end}$ , however, this blueprint evaporates; *phronesis* falters, thus stalling the development of character. The virtue required to face  $P_{end}$  must serve as a placeholder for the blueprint component of *phronesis*.

Historically, other peoples have confronted with  $P_{end}$ . Lear (2006) tells the story of Plenty Coups, the last great chief of the Crow nation, who navigated the collapse of his traditional way of life with courage – a feat enabled by *radical hope*. This virtue, radical hope, is directed toward a future goodness that is beyond current comprehension (Lear, 2006, p. 103). It could serve as a placeholder for the blueprint component of *phronesis*, facilitating character development in young people despite the threat of climate collapse.

There have been some recent efforts to cultivate radical hope in young people (Finnegan & d'Abreu, 2024; Fumkin, 2022; Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al., 2024), but nothing within the framework of character education. Virtues are often cultivated via stories (Carr & Harrison, 2015). I propose that J. R. R. Tolkien's stories, especially *The Lord of the Rings* (1954), could be effective for fostering radical hope. The Hobbits in Tolkien's narrative face the end of their way of life as they leave the Shire; they are guided by Gandalf, a wizard whose purpose is to inspire

hope, and Aragorn, whose Elvish name “Estel” translates to “hope”. Moreover, within Tolkien’s legendarium, goodness is associated not only with hope, but also with nature.

This hypothesis – that Tolkien’s stories could help cultivate radical hope in young people, aiding character development amidst climate collapse – could be evaluated via an intervention adapted from the Narnian virtues project (Pike et al., 2015; Francis et al., 2018). Lewis’s stories would be swapped for Tolkien’s, and one could include a measure for eco-anxiety (Coffey et al., 2021).

This discussion raises an interesting question regarding the universality of virtues. If virtues are universal, then the end of one’s way of life should not affect the pursuit of flourishing. However, while prototypical virtues may have some claim to universality (Darnell & Kristjánsson, 2020), they are nonetheless cultivated within particular ways of life. If the way of life ends, the virtues lose their context and intelligibility (Lear, 2006). I look forward to exploring this question further at the conference.

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