Growth or Mere Adaptation?

Character, Reality, and Human Development

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June 23, 2026

Introduction

Human beings must adapt in order to survive. They must adapt to changing personal circumstances: the birth of a child, the death of a loved one, making friends in a new city. They must adapt to changing economic circumstances: an expanding and contracting labor market, marketability of skills, the price of eggs. They must adapt to changing biological circumstances: aging, illness, maintaining their health. Yet some of the most damaging changes in our lives are also adaptations.

The child who gradually learns to lie to avoid punishment, the addict who uses to escape the memories of war, the executive who sacrifices safety for profit, the populist politician who rises to power by exploiting the fears of voters—in each case, the problem is not that the person failed to adapt. Each person has learned to navigate a particular environment successfully. It's that adaptation itself does not tell us whether we are becoming wiser, healthier, freer, or more capable of living well.

How do we distinguish between change that is growth and change that merely successful adaptation?

The Puzzle of Growth

There are many ways we can change, but not all those changes count as growth. When we grow, we are becoming in some sense "better" rather than staying the same or becoming "worse." Growth is inherently normative. To tell whether something is growing, we are comparing it against a standard it ought to meet.

Between conception and adulthood, a human being undergoes innumerable changes. Not all those changes contribute to growth. Some—like puberty—contribute to it. Others—like a serious illness—prevent it. We evaluate those changes against an implicit standard of what a human being ought to become. This standard is mutable. A century ago, it was considered abnormal to be left-handed. And it can be hotly contested. But in the case of adult development, it is even less clear what our shared standard of growth is supposed to be.

What are the specific capacities a person ought to have by virtue of being a partner, a family member, an employee, a community member, a citizen, or a member of humanity? What examples are worthy of admiration—and what makes them worthy?

One possible answer is *adaptation*. But while adaptation can explain how character forms, it does not explain why one form of character should be preferred to another.

Character as Adaptation

Human beings are not only shaped by their environments. They are also shaped by the actions they repeatedly take in those environments. Part of what makes action intelligible is that it is done in service to a goal that benefits us—some *value* we want to possess or exemplify.

Some of these values appear to arise from common features of human biology and psychology: safety, status, bodily necessities, leisure, allies, and social order. Others—particularities of diet, work/life balance, the nuclear family, or democracy—are culturally inherited.

Values are never pursued in a vacuum. They are always pursued within environments. All children rely upon caregivers for safety. But the form taken by safety, and how it must be attained, varies widely from family to family. In some families, the child may attain safety by crying. But if the primary caregivers are distracted by financial or emotional burdens, the child may have to amplify their emotional response to danger to get the caregivers' attention—or learn quickly how to take care of themselves.

Successful strategies tend to be repeated. They become habits. When a habit is deeply reinforced over a long enough period, it becomes second-nature to us. It becomes a disposition. Our dispositions describe our character.

Character is not simply chosen. It develops over time through the complex interactions between our embedded and embodied minds as we pursue values within specific environments. Character reflects both what we value and the conditions under which those values are pursued.

But if character is developed through adaptation, does adaptation tell us whether that character is good?

The Limits of Adaptation

Adaptation has the power to explain why certain character traits emerge. The individual pursues certain innate or culturally specific goals within a particular context or reward structure. Successful strategies are reinforced, and unsuccessful strategies are abandoned. But adaptation alone doesn't help us evaluate strategies. It doesn't tell us whether we should try to change them.

A child growing up in a chaotic caregiving environment may adapt by becoming hypervigilant or rebellious. A person who joins a cult may adapt by learning to intuit the unspoken desires of a charismatic leader. An executive learns to attain wealth and status through ruthlessness. A demagogue learns to attain power by manipulating the fears of voters.

All these strategies are adaptive in some sense. The individual's beliefs, skills, and dispositions fit the demands of a particular environment well enough to succeed—or even excel. But if the strategy is mostly adaptive—if it basically "works" somewhere—then why change it?

Adaptation itself cannot answer that question, because adaptation is purely explanatory. It's not normative. But growth *is* normative. It is the standard against which we *ought* to develop, not just the description or explanation of how we *do* develop. So to distinguish growth, we need some criterion beyond mere adaptation.

Aristotle's Alternative

Aristotle was not only concerned with how people live. He wanted to know what it means for a person to live *well*. He attempted to answer that question by asking what distinguishes human beings from other living beings. He observed that human beings are distinguished by virtue of possessing *reason*.

Human beings do not simply solve problems. They reflect on the ways they solve problems, and they evaluate the ends they pursue. The fact a human can even ask, "What does it mean to live well?" points in the direction of an answer. To live well requires us to develop our reason.

Reason, in Aristotle's sense, is not merely logical thinking. It's the capacity to perceive situations accurately, deliberate wisely, and act appropriately. Virtue is valuable because it supports this process. Courage helps us see danger without being overwhelmed by fear. Temperance helps us resist being dominated by appetite. Justice helps us navigate social reality fairly. Practical wisdom helps us discern what a particular situation requires.

In this framework, adaptation remains important. We must calibrate our responses to the changing demands of the natural and social world. But adaptation is no longer the standard of conduct. This allows us to look at a person who is in many respects successful given certain environmental incentive structures and still ask, "Is this person living well?" For Aristotle, a person who becomes increasingly unresponsive to reality is living poorly, regardless of how successful they appear to be.

But while Aristotle's solution is both elegant and has intuitive appeal, there are reasons to question it.

The Modern Challenge

Aristotle helps us distinguish between growth and mere adaptation by appealing to human nature. Reason is what is most distinctive to human nature, and to develop reason means reflecting on whether we are properly tracking and responding to reality. Aristotle's answer suggests that growth involves becoming more responsive to reality through the development of reason. But what if our access to reality is less straightforward than Aristotle assumed?

The very tools by which human beings encounter reality—perception and reason—are products of evolution. Evolution selects for survival and reproduction. But the ability to survive and reproduce is not the same as the ability to know what's true.

Using evolutionary game theory and mathematical modeling, cognitive scientist Donald Hoffman argues that natural selection favors fitness rather than truth. An organism that perceives a simplified interface that promotes survival will generally outcompete one that accurately tracks every feature of reality. Whether or not Hoffman's broader conclusions are correct, he highlights an important point: adaptation and reality-tracking may diverge. Aristotle assumes that reason allows us to move closer to reality. Hoffman suggests that evolution may systematically reward useful fictions instead.

All of which raises the question: If our access to reality is mediated by adapted systems, how can reality serve as our standard of development?

This question generates two forms of skepticism. There is epistemic skepticism, which raises the question, "Can we *know* reality?" And there is a deeper, evaluative skepticism which asks, "Why should reality *matter*?"

From an Aristotelian perspective, we may grant that our access to reality is never straightforward. We can be deeply, systematically mistaken about the features of reality. But that does not remove the need for some criterion beyond adaptation, since we know that successful adaptation can still produce distorted lives. The modern challenge may make reality more difficult to define, but it does not eliminate our concern for it. In fact, ordinary experience suggests that reality matters to us in a way that goes beyond mere adaptation.

Why Reality Still Matters

Imagine you are in a relationship that is perfect in every way you can imagine. Your partner's personality, interests, and beliefs appear ideally aligned with yours, and you are as happy as you can imagine being with a person. And yet, unbeknownst to you, they have been cheating on you for the last five years. Would you want to know the truth about their infidelity, even if it meant losing what appeared to be an otherwise perfect relationship?

Many people would say yes—because they believe cheating eventually has practical consequences, or because they value honesty. But according to Aristotle, what lies behind these reasons is a desire to remain in contact with reality. There is a reality to the relationship separate from my current subjective impression of it. Honesty is important precisely because it reflects the truth.

Not everyone would answer yes. The character Cipher from the movie *The Matrix* probably would not. But how a person answers that question seems to reveal something deep about their character: that their hierarchy of values is governed by the meta-value of truth. What they pursue is not only a matter of taste or pleasure. They want to remain in contact with reality while they do it. If reality matters independently of adaptation, then Aristotle may have identified something important even if his account of human nature is incomplete.

Reality-contact isn't merely a philosophical concern. It already appears inside contemporary psychology.

In the Dynamic Maturational Model of attachment, all attachment strategies are adaptive. They emerge from the way a developing person is constrained by caregiving and social environments to seek safety through proximity to others. The underlying organization of any attachment strategy can be understood by looking at the environment it developed in response to.

But the DMM does not assume all attachment strategies are equal. They can be evaluated by how well they integrate information from the environment with internal signals like emotion when

responding to danger. “Secure” strategies process danger information and comfort information in a way that remains flexible, context-sensitive, and developmentally sustainable. Insecure strategies are described by the ways in which they fail to meet this standard. The more information is “transformed” by the attachment strategy, the less flexibly responsive the strategy is to reality, and the more insecure it is.

The DMM assigns importance to coherence. All attachment strategies are attempts to integrate information into a coherent model of threat and relationship. But it doesn’t rely solely on coherence. An attachment strategy can be highly coherent—but also extraordinarily crisis-prone and even destructive of relationships. A person can have a clear concept of who victims and villains are, who is persecuting whom, what counts as safety and threat—and yet be completely disconnected from reality. What makes a strategy secure isn’t that it’s always producing the same “I feel secure” response, but that it is responsive to real threats and what the attachment figure is actually doing.

The standard of reality-contact also serves as a challenge to the popular modern standard of “authenticity”. Some of our most profound learning experiences in life involve a rearrangement of our hierarchy of values—and with that, a transformation of our character. But we can’t evaluate that change against some totally private, unique, felt sense of what is ultimately worthy—because it’s precisely that felt sense which experience is challenging us out of.

How we answer that challenge—whether by standing firmly in our conviction or changing—cannot be determined simply by looking or feeling inwardly. We have to measure our judgment against a higher standard, and that standard must include reality.

According to Aristotle, a rational life is guided by reality-contact, not alignment with a supposed authentic or true self. This shifts the question from, "What feels most like me?" to "What kind of person am I becoming?" For Aristotle, the answer depends on whether that development is bringing us into better contact with reality.

Adaptation may explain development, but reality helps us evaluate that development. It helps us differentiate between change that really benefits us and change that doesn’t. Without some notion of reality, growth becomes mere adaptation. Wisdom becomes effectiveness. And maturity becomes conformity.

Reality may be difficult to define. Our access to it may be imperfect. But abandoning reality entirely leaves us unable to distinguish growth from maladaptation.

Conclusion: Growth Beyond Adaptation

To live is to change. It is to adapt to circumstances. But adaptation alone cannot tell us what kind of life is worth living. We need some means by which to distinguish between growth and successful adaptation.

For Aristotle, our growth had to be guided by contact with reality. Truth was the ultimate standard of whether we were flourishing or simply adapting to circumstances. Modern philosophy and science have challenged the idea that we can determine what is real in a mind-independent way. But however difficult reality may be to define, abandoning it leaves us unable to distinguish growth from maladaptation.

Perhaps the deepest question is not whether we are changing—we cannot avoid change—but whether our changes are bringing us into better contact with reality or merely making us more comfortable within our existing adaptations.

Reality may be difficult to define, and our access to it may always be imperfect. Yet if we abandon it entirely, we lose our ability to distinguish growth from maladaptation, wisdom from effectiveness, and maturity from conformity.