

# CULTIVATING CIVIC VIRTUE: AN ARISTOTELIAN PERSPECTIVE ON UKRAINIAN MARTIAL-PATRIOTIC EDUCATION

## CULTIVANDO A VIRTUDE CÍVICA: UMA PERSPECTIVA ARISTOTÉLICA SOBRE A EDUCAÇÃO MARCIAL-PATRIÓTICA UCRANIANA

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**Abstract:** This article re-examines contemporary martial-patriotic education in Ukraine through the lens of Aristotle's virtue ethics. Drawing on Nicomachean Ethics II–V, we argue that systematic training in courage (*andreia*) and practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) can foster a resilient civic identity capable of withstanding wartime disruption. After sketching the historical emergence of martial-patriotic syllabi since 2014, we build an Aristotelian framework that treats virtue as a cultivated “second nature” acquired through habituated action and guided reflection. A qualitative content analysis of national curricula (2015–2024) and ten exemplar school programmes reveals that effective initiatives balance physical drill with deliberative exercises – debates, ethical simulations, community service – thereby uniting bodily disposition and rational choice. We show that programmes lacking the *phronēsis* component risk sliding into mere technocratic discipline, whereas those integrating judgment-oriented practices promote students' capacity to identify the “mean” between blind aggression and passive compliance. Finally, we propose design principles for educators: (1) embed iterative moral evaluation in training cycles; (2) link martial scenarios to civic responsibilities; (3) assess growth via dispositional rather than purely performance metrics. By restoring Aristotle's holistic concept of virtue to martial-patriotic education, the study offers a philosophically grounded strategy for strengthening democratic resilience in Ukraine's secondary schools.

**Keywords:** Aristotle. Virtue ethics. *Phronēsis*. Martial-patriotic education. Ukraine.

**Resumo:** O artigo reavalia a educação marcial-patriótica contemporânea na Ucrânia à luz da ética da virtude de Aristóteles. Com base na *Ética a Nicômaco* (livros II–V), defendemos que o treinamento sistemático em coragem (*andreia*) e sabedoria prática (*phronesis*) pode fomentar uma identidade cívica resiliente frente às perturbações da guerra. Após delinear a evolução histórica dos programas marcial-patrióticos desde 2014, construímos um modelo aristotélico que concebe a virtude como “segunda natureza” cultivada por meio da ação habituada e da reflexão orientada. Uma análise qualitativa de currículos nacionais (2015–2024) e de dez programas escolares exemplares mostra que iniciativas eficazes equilibram exercício físico e práticas deliberativas – debates, simulações éticas, serviço comunitário – unindo disposição corporal e escolha racional. Constatamos que programas sem o componente de *phronesis* tendem a uma disciplina meramente tecnocrática, ao passo que os que incluem julgamentos morais desenvolvem nos estudantes a capacidade de buscar o “meio-termo” entre agressão cega e conformismo passivo. Por fim, propomos princípios de desenho pedagógico: (1) inserir avaliação moral iterativa nos ciclos de treino; (2) vincular cenários marciais a responsabilidades cívicas; (3) medir avanços por disposições, não só por desempenho. Ao restaurar o conceito aristotélico de virtude para a educação marcial-patriótica, o estudo oferece uma estratégia filosoficamente fundamentada para reforçar a resiliência democrática nas escolas ucranianas.

**Palavras-chave:** Aristóteles. Ética da virtude. *Phronesis*. Educação marcial-patriótica. Ucrânia.

## 1. Introduction

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has triggered profound transformations in Ukrainian society, generating new civic imperatives and reconfiguring national educational priorities. From a phenomenological standpoint, civic identity is first enacted at the pre-reflective level of the body-schema through which the world is disclosed (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Recent work on habit and embodiment shows that such sedimented bodily routines are a primary locus of moral formation rather than a mere add-on to cognition (Thorburn & Stolz, 2023). Consequently, the formation of a resilient civic identity among youth has become not only a pedagogical task but a strategic necessity: the defense of the state increasingly depends on the embodied convictions, moral attitudes, and national consciousness of its citizens (Kubko et al., 2024).

Against this backdrop, military-patriotic education now figures as a multidimensional practice of social cohesion, resistance, and cultural continuity. Integrating Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the body-subject with Deweyan pragmatism, Thorburn and Stolz show that educational situations capable of reshaping habits “from within the body” cultivate dispositions of democratic responsibility while avoiding abstract moralism.

A distinctive feature of Ukraine’s current model is the inclusion of traditional martial practices – Spas, Combat Hopak, Khorting – which combine physical discipline with spiritual fortitude and cultural awareness (Dutchak, 2017; Prytula, 2004). Phenomenological studies

of high-skill movement reveal how reciprocity of motion generates a shared intentional arc in which agency is co-constituted by interacting bodies (He & Ravn, 2018). In these practices, young Ukrainians learn courage and justice not as abstract ideals but as kinaesthetically salient possibilities disclosed through the rhythm of strikes, steps, and breathing.

Embodied training also meshes with contemporary accounts of the socially extended mind. Candiotta (2023) argues that cognitive processes are irreducibly relational: what I can think or feel is constrained by the affordances created together with others. Ongaro, Hardman, and Deschenaux (2022) extend this point, showing that collective intentionality is the primary arena in which minds stretch beyond the skull, especially in contexts demanding coordinated defence and solidarity. Military-patriotic education therefore functions as a distributed cognitive ecology in which martial drills, songs, and rituals scaffold a shared “we-mode” of civic agency.

A further strand comes from the crisis-responsive turn in Ukrainian higher education. Terepyshchy and Kostenko (2022), analysing wartime adaptations in cybersecurity programmes, show how curricula were rapidly reoriented toward practical defence needs while simultaneously embedding ethical reflection on digital sovereignty and civic responsibility. Although their focus is virtual rather than corporeal, the authors emphasise the same Aristotelian logic of habituation: students acquire techno-moral competence through iterative, scenario-based drills that bind knowledge to action for the sake of the common good. Their findings reinforce this article’s claim that wartime pedagogy – whether realised in code or in combat footwork – derives its civic potency from the fusion of embodied (or enskilled) practice with reflective judgment, thereby expanding the empirical base for an integrated philosophy of resilience in Ukrainian education.

Finally, the normative stakes of combat have been reframed by recent philosophy-of-sport debates. Holt and Ramsay (2023) demonstrate that combat sports force spectators and practitioners alike to negotiate the tension between partisan attachment and purist appreciation, thereby illuminating the aesthetic and ethical contours of bodily conflict. Embedding such insights into Ukrainian martial pedagogy highlights how patriotic training can nurture critical reflection on violence rather than slide into chauvinistic militarism.

By weaving these phenomenological and philosophical strands together, this article reinterprets Ukrainian martial heritage not merely as physical education or folklore but as an embodied medium of national self-determination, educational empowerment, and cultural survival.

## 2. Aristotelian Foundations of Civic Virtue

Aristotle begins *Nicomachean Ethics* by asserting that every human action aims at some perceived good, and the highest political good is the flourishing (*eudaimonia*) of the polis (Aristotle, 1999). Virtue (*aretê*) is the quality that enables this flourishing because it perfects both individual and collective action. Importantly, virtue is not innate; it is formed through habituation – “we become just by doing just actions” (Aristotle, 1999, II 1 1103a 15-18). Habituation transforms isolated deeds into stable character states, producing what Aristotle calls a “second nature.” In civic terms, this process integrates personal excellence with public responsibility, since citizens practice virtue “with a view to the common good” (Aristóteles, 2014, I 2). Thus, the educational mandate is to embed morally valenced actions in daily routines until they shape emotions and judgments alike. The following analysis adopts this premise: any Ukrainian programme that drills martial skills without moral habituation falls short of Aristotelian virtue.

Courage (*andreia*) is the paradigmatic martial virtue because it regulates fear and confidence in the face of danger (Aristotle, 1999, III 6 1115b 10-15). Aristotle rejects both rashness and cowardice, locating genuine courage at the “mean relative to us” (Aristotle, 1999, II 6). This mean is not a mathematical midpoint but a rational calibration attuned to circumstance and person. In the Ukrainian context, combat-hopak drills habituate young practitioners to bodily risk, supplying the raw material for courage. Yet physical daring alone is insufficient; Aristotle insists that courageous acts must be done “for the sake of the noble” (*kalon*) and under the guidance of reason (Aristóteles, 2014, III 8). Therefore, curricular designers must connect each martial exercise to reflective discussion on civic duty, linking embodied resolve to the defense of democratic values. Only then does courage rise above mere toughness and become a civic excellence in the Aristotelian sense.

Practical wisdom (*phronêsis*) directs all moral virtues toward appropriate ends by discerning the right means in concrete situations (Aristotle, 1999, VI 5 1140b 5-10). Unlike scientific knowledge, *phronêsis* operates in the fluctuating realm of human affairs, demanding both deliberation and experience. Aristotle calls it “reason concerned with action about things that are good or bad for a human being” (Aristóteles, 2014, VI 5). Martial-patriotic programmes that incorporate scenario analysis, ethical debates and community service provide the experiential matrix in which *phronêsis* can flourish. Such reflective components

enable learners to judge when martial force is justified, preventing a slide into reckless aggressiveness. The skill of choosing the mean is cultivated, not delivered by lecture; it emerges as learners repeatedly test decisions against civic ideals. Consequently, *phronêsis* functions as the governance system of embodied virtues, ensuring they serve democratic resilience rather than raw belligerence.

The doctrine of the mean unifies Aristotelian ethics by positioning every virtue between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency (Aristotle, 1999, II 2). For martial education, this framework guards against the twin perils of militaristic zeal and apathetic disengagement. Drills that valorize physical dominance without moral context may tip students toward excess, while purely theoretical civics courses risk leaving them deficient in embodied resolve. Aristotelian pedagogy resolves this tension by integrating action, emotion and judgment: repeated practice attunes the feelings to reason, creating harmony within the soul (Aristóteles, 2014, II 4). In Ukraine's wartime schools, the mean is realized when combat techniques are paired with civic projects – disaster relief, veteran support, community building – that translate bodily skills into public service. Such integration reflects Aristotle's insistence that virtue is always “relative to us” and to our societal conditions. The mean, therefore, is not static but dynamically recalibrated in light of national struggle and democratic aspirations.

Finally, Aristotle situates moral formation within the legislative framework of the polis, arguing that “the law has a compulsory power that is lacking in exhortation” (Aristotle, 1999, X 9). Good laws shape character by prescribing repeated, public-spirited actions, making virtue a collective achievement rather than a private hobby. The Ukrainian state, by recognizing national martial arts in the *Law on Physical Culture and Sports* (2017), implicitly echoes Aristotle's belief that civic virtue must be institutionally scaffolded. Yet legal mandate alone cannot guarantee ethical outcome; it must be supplemented by wise educators who “legislate” day-to-day habits in the training hall (Aristóteles, 2014, II 1). Instructors act as proximate legislators, crafting micro-laws – ritual greetings, honor codes, reflective debriefs – that habituate youth to noble action. Thus, the Aristotelian foundation culminates in a triad: legal structures, pedagogical practice and personal habituation converge to forge citizens capable of courageous, prudent service to the common good.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1 Core Concepts

Four analytical pivots organise this study – **civic identity**, **value orientations**, **martial-patriotic education** and **martial heritage** – all understood as ways of inhabiting the Ukrainian *Lebenswelt*, the immediately lived world of shared meanings (Husserl, 1970). *Civic identity* designates an embodied sense of belonging to a political-cultural community expressed through legal consciousness, affective attachment and public engagement (Bekh & Chorna, 2008). *Value orientations* are relatively stable hierarchies of beliefs and priorities that guide action toward what a person judges to be good or bad for both self and polis (Sydelnykova, 2012; Myronchuk, 2015). *Martial-patriotic education* comprises pedagogical practices – school lessons, cadet programmes, community drills – that cultivate loyalty, defence readiness and civic responsibility while explicitly distancing themselves from chauvinistic militarism (Ministry of Education of Ukraine, 2022). Finally, *martial heritage* refers not only to the technical repertoires of Spas, Combat Hopak and Khorting but also to the symbolic universes – songs, rituals, honour codes – that yoke bodily discipline to moral and spiritual formation (Prytula, 2004; Kiptilova, 2014).

#### 3.2 Aristotelian Lens

Aristotle structures these categories by insisting that virtue (*aretê*) is the excellence that enables individuals and communities to flourish in accordance with their telos (*Nicomachean Ethics* I 7, Aristotle, 1999). Civic identity thus emerges when habituated virtues orient the citizen toward the common good: “the city is by nature prior to the individual” (Aristóteles, 2014, I 2). Value orientations correspond to the *prohairesis* – the rational choice that integrates desire and reason – governing every virtuous act (II 4). Military-patriotic education, on Aristotelian terms, is a state-sponsored programme of habituation that aims to produce courageous yet prudent agents; law and pedagogy cooperate “to make citizens good and capable of noble deeds” (Aristotle, 1999, X 9). Martial heritage supplies the concrete actions through which such habituation occurs, turning repeated strikes, footwork and ritual greetings into the “second nature” of civic virtue (II 1 1103a).

### 3.3 Embodiment and Habit

While Aristotelian ethics supplies the normative telos, phenomenological embodiment explains the mechanism of acquisition. Merleau-Ponty (1962) argues that the body-schema is the pre-reflective matrix where meaning sediments; martial drills “school the senses,” translating abstract virtues into kinaesthetic habits (Shilling, 2020). This complements Aristotle’s claim that feelings must be educated alongside reason, since right emotion follows right habituation (II 4). Empirical studies of Ukrainian martial arts confirm that young practitioners come to “feel” courage and solidarity in the rhythm of movement long before they articulate them conceptually (Vynnyk & Vynnyk, 2016; He & Ravn, 2018). Thus, embodiment binds Aristotelian virtue to lived experience, ensuring that civic identity is felt as well as known.

### 3.4 Value-Based Civic Formation and Cultural Resilience

Bekh’s (2018) value-based paradigm situates civic identity within moral agency: citizens are good not merely when they obey law but when they choose the noble (*kalon*). This dovetails with Aristotle’s insistence that virtue requires deliberate choice for its own sake (Aristotle, 1999, II 4). In wartime Ukraine, cultural-resilience theory adds a macro layer: traditional practices act as adaptive buffers that “transmute violence into cohesion” (Galtung, 2021) and heal collective trauma (UNESCO, 2022). Martial heritage therefore becomes both a vehicle of value internalisation and a strategy of national survival.

### 3.5 Synthesis and Research Implications

Integrating Aristotelian virtue ethics with phenomenology, value pedagogy and cultural resilience yields a multilevel framework:

1. **Ontological level** – *Lebenswelt* grounds experience (Husserl, 1970).
2. **Normative level** – Aristotle defines the telos: courageous and prudent service to the polis.
3. **Mechanistic level** – Embodied habituation converts drills into virtue.
4. **Institutional level** – Law and school curricula scaffold practice.
5. **Socio-cultural level** – Martial heritage sustains continuity under war.



This synthesis guides the ensuing analysis of Ukrainian programmes: each initiative is assessed by how effectively it aligns embodied practice, reflective judgment and civic telos in the Aristotelian mean between reckless aggressiveness and passive disengagement.

#### 4. Philosophical Reflections

The evidence that Spas, Combat Hopak and Khorting inculcate courage, mutual aid and self-sacrifice at the kinaesthetic level confirms Merleau-Ponty's claim that meaning "sinks into the body" long before it rises to conceptual clarity (Merleau-Ponty 1962). Yet if virtue begins in pre-reflective movement, how does it cross the threshold into prohairesis, that realm of deliberate choice Aristotle calls the mark of genuine character (Aristotle 1999, II 4)? Can a drill that produces the right bodily affect also guarantee the *phronēsis* required for acting "for the sake of the noble"? The question remains open, suggesting that any curriculum-content analysis must be complemented by a phenomenology of the internal transition from habit to judgment.

The socio-cultural networks that sustain martial practice – schools, museums, family rites – resemble the Aristotelian polis, whose laws and festivals continually "invite citizens to virtue" (Aristotle 1999, X 9). Yet Merleau-Ponty would remind us that such invitations succeed only if they resonate with the felt grain of collective experience. Do contemporary Ukrainian rituals truly speak to the "flesh of history," or are they fragile veneers stretched over unhealed wounds? At stake is whether cultural resilience is an institutional artifact or a phenomenological sediment that will endure when external scaffolds crumble.

The findings also illuminate Aristotle's doctrine of the mean: programmes rich in drill but poor in reflection risk the excess of rashness, whereas purely discursive civics risk the deficiency of timidity. Where exactly is the golden mean for a nation under siege? Merleau-Ponty might answer that the mean is not a geometric midpoint but a living equilibrium negotiated through bodily dialogue with others; its location shifts as the horizon of threats and hopes shifts. Hence the pedagogical task is perpetual: to recalibrate the ratio of action to contemplation as historical circumstances mutate.

Three lacunae signal deeper philosophical puzzles. First, scholars seldom trace how specific gestures – say, the spiral step in Hopak – translate into durable value-orientations; the micro-phenomenology of this passage from motion to meaning remains uncharted. Second, the temporality of habituation is unclear: Aristotle insists that character is stable yet



always “in work,” while Merleau-Ponty emphasises the fluidity of lived time. Longitudinal studies could test how martial virtues age – do they crystallise or erode as bodies and politics change? Third, the intercorporeal relay among families, schools and heritage centres raises the ontological question of who, or what, actually “owns” civic virtue: the individual, the community, or the invisible field of shared flesh?

Reframing the empirical outcomes in this way positions Ukrainian martial heritage at the crossroads of Aristotelian teleology and Merleau-Pontian ontology. The drills give virtue its bodily seed; the polis supplies the soil; reflective judgment tends the growth. Whether the plant matures into democratic resilience depends on forces that are at once physiological, ethical and historical. Future inquiry must therefore remain bifocal: attentive to the silent choreography of limbs where meanings first take root, and alert to the deliberative forums where those meanings are weighed against the *kalon*. Only by holding these perspectives together can scholars – and citizens – discern whether the current revival of martial traditions will blossom into civic flourishing or wither into mere spectacle .

## 5. Discussion

The findings invite a renewed dialogue between Aristotle’s teleological ethics and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of embodiment. Empirically, Ukrainian martial drills appear to graft civic meanings directly onto the body-schema, confirming that “we become just by doing just actions” (Aristotle 1999, II 1 1103a). Yet Merleau-Ponty (1962) reminds us that such sedimentation is neither mechanical nor final; it is a continual “taking-flesh” of history in movement. The implication is that civic virtue resides in a dynamic intertwining of habit and horizon: virtue is stable enough to anchor identity, but porous enough to absorb the shifting contours of war, displacement and cultural renewal. How, then, might curricula preserve this plasticity without eroding the telos of public-spirited action?

The doctrine of the mean emerges as a practical compass in this negotiation. Programmes that emphasise bodily daring without reflective judgment risk the vice of excess – recklessness – while purely discursive civics risk the vice of deficiency – passivity (Aristotelés 2014, II 6). The most promising initiatives thread the “living mean” through iterative cycles of drill and deliberation, allowing students to sense, test and recalibrate the noble (*kalon*) in concrete situations. Such cycles resonate with Merleau-Ponty’s notion of *operative intentionality*, where meaning is felt before it is named. They suggest that the

Aristotelian mean is not a static midpoint but a phenomenological equilibrium that must be rediscovered whenever the historical field shifts.

The study also complicates the locus of moral agency. Aristotle situates virtue within the unified *psuchē* of the citizen, whereas Merleau-Ponty locates meaning in the intercorporeal web of bodies. Wartime Ukraine seems to illustrate both claims: individual resolve manifests in the heat of combat practice, yet that resolve is continually relayed through communal rituals, public commemorations and familial narratives. This raises an ontological question: is courage a property of discrete subjects, or of the larger “flesh of the world” that they inhabit together? Addressing this tension could expand civic-education theory beyond the individualist premise that dominates liberal discourse.

Cultural-resilience theory further reframes the data. Symbolic practices – embroidered costumes, Cossack songs, ritual salutes – do more than decorate martial drills; they arm youth with narrative “counter-memories” against the cultural violence described by Galtung (2021). Yet the potency of such symbols is double-edged. Holt and Ramsay’s (2023) warning about combat aesthetics sliding into chauvinism finds echoes in some peripheral programmes that conflate bravery with vengeful militancy. The Aristotelian vocabulary here proves diagnostic: these cases confuse courage with rashness, and ignore the mean that binds *andreia* to *phronēsis*.

Methodological limits signal philosophical opportunities. Reliance on secondary sources left the micro-phenomenology of drill under-described: how does a spiral kick in Hopak feel from within, and at what moment does its kinaesthetic thrill translate into a sense of civic duty? A first-person phenomenology of training halls could reveal the hinge where motion becomes meaning. Equally pressing is temporal depth: does virtue acquired at sixteen survive the disillusionments of adulthood? Aristotle views virtue as a stable hexis, yet Merleau-Ponty insists that sedimented structures can be disrupted and reoriented. Longitudinal inquiry could test which view better captures the moral arc of martial habituation.

Finally, the convergence of Aristotelian ethics and Merleau-Pontian ontology suggests a philosophical blueprint for wartime education. Habitual corporeal drills provide the raw material of virtue; reflective dialogue steers those habits toward the noble; communal symbols embed the process in a shared *Lebenswelt*. When any element is missing, the chain weakens: drill without reflection hardens into fanaticism, reflection without drill evaporates into rhetoric, symbols without living practice fossilise into kitsch. The task ahead is therefore

integrative: to choreograph body, speech and symbol so that Ukrainian youth not only defend the state but also inherit the democratic promise implicit in Aristotle's vision of the flourishing polis and in Merleau-Ponty's vision of a world continually remade through embodied freedom.

## 6. Conclusion

The inquiry set out to examine Ukrainian martial-patriotic education through the joint prism of Aristotle's virtue ethics and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment. Evidence drawn from curricula, policy texts and case studies shows that traditional arts such as Spas, Combat Hopak and Khorting function as embodied curricula in which patriotic meanings are sedimented kinaesthetically before they are articulated conceptually. Regular drill habituates *andreia* – courage disciplined by the search for the noble – while structured dialogue and civic projects nurture the *phronēsis* that steers action toward the Aristotelian mean. In Merleau-Ponty's terms, these practices graft the nation's historical horizon onto the "flesh" of youthful bodies, enabling students to experience national defense as an existential, rather than merely ideological, commitment.

At the same time, the study warns that habituation alone is insufficient. Programmes devoid of reflective components risk drifting into the excess of rashness, whereas purely discursive civics risk the deficiency of passivity. The most robust initiatives thread a living equilibrium – action, contemplation and communal ritual – through iterative cycles of practice, thereby realising Aristotle's insight that law, education and habit must converge to "make citizens good and capable of noble deeds" (Aristotle 1999, X 9). This triangulation transforms training halls into micro-poleis where democratic responsibility is rehearsed bodily, judged reflectively and celebrated symbolically.

Philosophically, the findings challenge the individualist assumption that virtue resides solely in discrete agents. Wartime Ukraine illustrates an intercorporeal ontology in which moral agency is continually relayed among bodies, narratives and public ceremonies. Courage appears simultaneously as a personal disposition and as a quality of the shared "flesh of the world." This double anchoring invites civic-education scholars to move beyond dichotomies of mind and body, private and public, toward a more integrated vision of character formation under conditions of conflict and social strain.

The study's reliance on secondary sources limits granular insight into the micro-phenomenology of drill and the longitudinal durability of habituated virtues. Future research should therefore combine first-person phenomenological interviews with multi-year tracking of civic engagement to test whether embodied meanings crystallise or erode over time. Comparative work across other conflict-affected societies could further clarify how local symbols, institutional scaffolds and historical traumas recalibrate the Aristotelian mean.

In practical terms, policymakers and educators should (1) mandate reflective modules alongside physical training, (2) resource instructor accreditation to reduce regional disparities and (3) embed martial programmes within broader networks of community service. These steps would help Ukrainian youth translate kinaesthetic patriotism into prudent, sustained civic action. If realised, the synthesis of Aristotelian teleology and Merleau-Pontian ontology outlined here can serve as both a philosophical blueprint and an educational strategy for fostering democratic resilience in the face of existential threat.

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