



## The Editor-in-Chief should be a virtuous friend of the scientific and broader community

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Picano [1] asks who the Editor-in-Chief (EiC) of an academic journal is, rather than just asking how the EiC should behave. This focus on character invites reflection from the tradition of virtue ethics. Though virtue ethics is found all over the world, in the Western philosophical tradition, the most notorious defender of virtue ethics is Aristotle. Here, we focus on the roles of the EiC in light of the four cardinal virtues—courage, temperance, justice, and prudence—and we add to these four virtues a particular reflection on the Aristotelian virtue of friendship (*philia*) [2] in “navigating the complex relationships among authors, reviewers, and publishers” (p. 1, [1]). We encourage thinking about the EiC as a virtuous friend of the scientific and broader community who encourages dialogue as a means to reach the truth. We offer questions that the EiC might wish to ask themselves in the form of character-building heuristics (Table 1), and encourage journals to offer a free forum for dialogue in the form of letters to the editor (LTEs) where virtuous debate at the interface of science and society can take place.

**Table 1. Character-building questions for the Editor-in-Chief.** Inspired by [2].

Virtue	Guiding question for the Editor-in-Chief
Courage	Do I embrace external criticism and divergent views so as to develop an excellent journal?
Temperance	Do I forgo self-indulgent pleasures in my decision making?
Justice	Do I correct the possible harms that my actions and those of other agents may cause?
Prudence	What is the best goal for the journal, and what is the best way to get there?
Friendship	Do I demonstrate goodwill towards all members of the community?

There are three units of analysis within normative ethical theories: the agent (virtue ethics), the act (deontology), and the outcome (consequentialism) [3]. Aristotle [4] focused on the agent and considered that the virtuous agent strives to find the middle ground, the golden mean, between two extremes. Between



cowardice and foolhardiness is courage (*andreia*), between indulgence and insensitivity is temperance (*sophrosune*), between selfishness and selflessness is justice (*dikaiosune*), and between impetuosity and indecision is practical wisdom or prudence (*phronesis*). Friendship (*philia*) requires that parties should express mutual goodwill and, according to Aristotle, are of three kinds (aiming at virtue, utility or pleasure, according to Aristotle). We envisage Picano's mention of the "complex relationships among authors, reviewers, and publishers" within the concept of a virtuous *philia*. Following Siapka [2], the use of reflections from virtue ethics is encouraged as a kind of character-building heuristics in the form of questions to oneself (Table 1).

Many of these themes are present in Picano's editorial [1]. For instance, he mentions the "essential qualities" (p. 8) of a good editor, which include the sense of justice involved in correcting their own mistakes (p. 4) and the courage to be unpopular (p. 8). He also discusses duties from a deontological perspective (p. 8), which include declaring any and all conflicts of interest [5].

Moving this discussion towards friendship in the Aristotelian sense, we consider that the goal (or "*telos*" in Aristotelian terms) of academic publishing is the free exchange of ideas. As a virtuous friend of the community, the EiC's interactions with the community should be oriented towards this overarching goal. The exchange of ideas includes the presentation of original research, as well as commentary, stressing the need for academic journals to allow for commentaries from their editorial leadership, as well as a diverse readership, both on published findings and other commentary, ideas or reflections. Such commentary could benefit not only that journal's readership, but also a wider readership.

One source of commentary from a journal's editorial board is the editorial. Editorials provide a diverse article format with different functions, including post-publication commentary. Broadly speaking, they communicate a journal's personality [6]. It has been argued that editorials "stimulate" rather than "influence" readership, often provoking comments that may be in disagreement with a position on a given subject [7]. However, for editorials to efficiently perform this function (i.e., to allow an open and fair debate), the readership requires an accessible comment forum. Without such a forum, they would be deprived of the opportunity to become proactive citizens of an intellectual community, instead being positioned as passive consumers of editorial content. Providing such a forum is an act of goodwill towards all members of the community who read an academic journal.

LTEs serve important roles in communication in science. The ICMJE and COPE guidelines on ethical publishing both consider that journals should offer LTEs to their authors. Although the primary function recognised for LTEs is post-publication peer review, LTEs play many other roles in biomedical and other journals [8]. Importantly, LTEs can be written by individuals other than researchers, such as patients affected by a given disease [9], thereby increasing citizen engagement in academic publication, and broadly aligning with the communication goals of democracies and free societies. An editorial policy of publishing editorials without allowing for the possibility of LTEs would give editors a privileged approach to commentary akin to "we write, you read." This approach would deny potential authors, both expert and non-experts alike who may have concerns with published content, from having their say. It would prevent them from expressing themselves in the same academic medium in which editors and their editorials have established exclusive rights, thus undermining readers' rights as knowledge contributors in a phenomenon that has been coined "epistemic injustice" [10].

In conclusion, the virtuous EiC is a friend of science and society who encourages the free exchange of ideas in academic publishing and works towards that noble end.

## Abbreviations

EiC: Editor-in-Chief

LTEs: letters to the editor

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TD, JATdS: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing—original draft, Writing—review & editing, Validation. Both authors read and approved the submitted version.

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