



Why ‘Flourishing’ Is Difficult

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1. Life, Death and Ethics Education

There is a story told of a meeting of heads of major British schools half a century ago at which one headmaster proclaimed to his colleagues 'At our school we prepare our boys for life' to which another replied 'at ours we prepare them for death'. If the first statement now seems commonplace and vacuous, the latter remains singular and thought-provoking. Since the second speaker was head of a religious school it is likely that he had in mind a responsibility to prepare pupils for a transcendent destiny, more precisely for what in Christian eschatology are termed 'the four last things': death, judgement, heaven and hell. One need not share that or any other religious view, however, to think that as well as equipping pupils with knowledge and skills, education might seek to give or enable them to form some conception of the meaning or significance of life, and that a mark of the adequacy of such a conception is that should help them when need arises to contemplate the fact of mortality, not just acknowledging it as an empirical fact but seeing - and living - life in the light of it.

Even with the distancing from a distinctive religious conception, however, the idea that schooling might involve or be shaped with an eye to preparing pupils for death is likely to seem troublesome for a variety of reasons. First, is it not macabre in working with the young to have in view dying and death? We do not seem, however, to have such qualms when it comes to health and lifestyle education, observing and illustrating, sometimes graphically, the threats of poor diet, lack of exercise, smoking, drug-taking, risky sexual activity, and environmental degradation. Here the point is to use the presumed, and presumed to be rational, fear of morbidity and death to encourage certain attitudes and practices. So if it is acceptable to bring mortality into the picture in the interests of physical health why not

in the interest of moral and spiritual health? This leads to a second and seemingly more substantial concern, for while it is assumed to be uncontroversial what constitutes physical well-being it is 'officially' held to be contentious what constitutes moral, spiritual or 'existential' well-being - 'officially' because this is not in fact treated as an obstacle when it comes to advancing prevalent orthodoxies which in present times include the values of environmental sustainability, social inclusion, diversity and equality. Another way of putting this, relevant to the earlier theme of preparation for death, is that it is presumed to be unproblematic to say that physical illness and death are evils to be avoided, but problematic to consider what might constitute moral or spiritual illness or to suggest as does Socrates in the *Gorgias* (475) that death is not the worst evil than can befall a human being.

A third and related consideration arises from the circumstance of modern liberalism both in general as it forms part of the culture, and thereby the culture of education, but more specifically in the context of the publicly-funded 'common school'. According to certain current versions of political liberalism the state may not advance let alone support any particular conception of the good life, beyond perhaps that of the goods of citizenship and of a just political order. Accordingly, publicly funded and or regulated schooling may not seek to promote particular moral, spiritual or philosophical visions of life (and death) other than the ethics of responsible and respectful citizenship and those cannot reach into questions of life's meaning and value.

There are of, course, rejoinders to the second and third points some of which follow the pattern of the implied response to the first. If it is acceptable to discuss physical health which is a normative notion, why not moral and spiritual health? Admittedly the idea of bodily well-being may be less controversial but that may also be because it is partial and less profound than that of 'existential' well-being or of flourishing more broadly construed. In that case it looks as if the avoidance of considering what constitutes a good life - including some understanding of why death may be an evil but not perhaps the greatest one - constitutes a hollowing out of education, and a refusal on the part of

educationalists and politicians to provide, if only in terms of a broad framework for later development, what human beings most need if they are to live well.

Something of this trajectory of ideas has featured in thinking about what if anything to include in the school curriculum by way of ethics since the decline of traditional forms of moral and religious education and instruction that prevailed up to the early 1960s. A very brief history of what followed would begin with the search for universal or at any rate trans-cultural values ¹ succeeded by a retreat from the affirmation of substantial norms and ideals prompted by the questioning of traditional roles and values, and a consequent turn towards the service of enabling pupils to identify their own values. This brought together educational and psychotherapeutic ideas associated with John Dewey and Carl Rogers to form the practice of 'values-clarification' modelled and promoted by Howard Kirschenbaum:

Instead of simply inculcating and modeling values, educators were now encouraged to help students *clarify their own values*, learn higher levels of *moral reasoning*, and learn the skills of *value analysis*. Educators were counseled to avoid imposing their own values and morals on their students because, the argument went, in an increasingly pluralistic society, whose values are the "right values"? A better course seemed to be to help young people learn the skills of moral reasoning and responsible decision making that would enable them to lead more personally satisfying and socially constructive lives.²

¹ See C.K.M. Kluckhohn, 'Education, Values, and Anthropological Relativity' (1947) in R. Kluckhohn ed., *Culture and Behavior: Collected essays of Clyde Kluckhohn* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1962): "The mere existence of universals after so many millennia of culture history and in such diverse environments suggest that they correspond to something extremely deep in man's nature and/or are necessary conditions to social life" p. 296.

² See H. Kirchenbaum, 'A comprehensive model for values education and moral education' *Phi Delta Kappan*, 73 (10) 1992, pp. 771–776. For a summary overview of the approach see S. J. Kulich and R. Chi

The criticisms of this are multitudinous. While identifying ‘value’ as an important category of experience and thought it then fails to draw any serious distinctions between different kinds of values: individual, social, instrumental, prudential, moral, aesthetic, spiritual, or provide any means of assessing their relative significance. In the context of education this is analogous to saying that ‘belief’ is a significant category of thought but not distinguishing kinds of belief – empirical, theoretical, historical, scientific, religious, etc - or considering their claims to the status of knowledge. The practice of values-clarification is implicitly sceptical or relativistic or at least problematically agnostic about the rational status of value claims which undermines the motivating idea that that is important to be clear about one’s values. Relatedly it suppresses the critical faculties by discouraging dialectical argument between advocates of different values. It also tends to encourage individualistic, self-directed and even solipsistic evaluation.

One response to this (associated in the UK with the Gordon Cook Foundation³) was to retain the focus on the category of values, in contrast to earlier emphasis on moral rules and principles, but to shift from guided self-reflection to actual and explicit values-education encouraging and directing pupils to favour certain kinds of personal and social goods. Apart from facing relativist and liberal challenges (but perhaps because of them), in its effort to steer between paternalism and neutralism, values-education

‘Values Clarification’ in A.C. Michalos ed. *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-being Research* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014)

³ See <https://www.gordoncook.org/>. One of the present authors, Haldane, was supported by the Cook Foundation in organizing lectures by Mary Midgley, Anthony O’Hear, Anthony Quinton, Jonathan Sacks, Mary Warnock and others on aspects of values education at St Andrews and other UK universities. These were subsequently published along with additional chapters in J. Haldane ed. *Values Education and the Human World* (Exeter: ImprintAcademic, 2004).

tended to rest on the shifting ground of cultural consensus.⁴ There is however, a different kind of objection rooted in the structure of moral psychology which is no less relevant to values clarification and values-education than to the traditional inculcation of rules and principles. As J.S. Mill observed 'it really is of importance not only what men do but what manner of men they are that do it'.⁵ This issue is not simply that of the evaluability of motivation as well as of conduct, but rather that *how* one interprets, orders, integrates and responds to elements of the moral economy, and indeed *whether* one even does so or not, or does so in the right way and for the right reasons, depends upon one's *moral character*.

This brings us to the recent history of character and virtues education but also to the idea that the point of good character is not unconnected with that of the idea of living and benefitting from a good life. The brief history sketched above involved a movement from the *deontological* (rules and principles) to the instrumentally *prudential* (clarity and coherence in one's desires) to the *axiological* (values) to the *aretaic* (character and virtue) and given the Aristotelian nature of the latter it is then natural to look to the *teleological* as a completion of the previous step, seeing the role of virtue as relating instrumentally and constitutively to leading a good life, or equivalently a flourishing one.

While the focus thus far has been on schooling and educational theory, talk of 'flourishing' has begun to take the place of ethics-codes and of happiness-promotion in a wide range of theoretical and practical contexts ranging from personal and social development studies, economics, healthcare, and psychology, through statements of corporate and institutional aims and objectives, as in the formula 'our goal is to enable/promote the flourishing of every member of our community', and self-help and

⁴ See D. Carr and J. Landon, 'Teachers and Schools as Agents of Values Education: Parts One and Two' *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 19 (2) 1998 and 20 (1), 1999, respectively. Also Carr 'Problems of Values Education' in *Values Education and the Human World*.

⁵ *On Liberty* Chapter 3 'Of Individuality, As One of the Elements of Well-Being'. The passage continues: "Among the works of man, which human life is rightly employed in perfecting and beautifying, the first in importance surely is man himself. ...".

support group guides, through to commercial advertising. It also features as the rationale for academic programmes and research institutes such as those at Harvard, Notre Dame, Oklahoma and John Hopkins Universities.⁶

One seeming advantage of this change of focus is that it avoids the narrowness and existential remoteness of rule-based systems while transcending the hollow, amoral and subjectivist associations of ‘personal happiness’ understood as preference satisfaction. Another is that it has an organic connotation deriving from its etymology (L. *florere* = flowering) that resonates with a pervasive advancing of the idea of natural ends in contrast to human preferences, a point captured by Mill in a continuation of the passage quoted above where he writes that “Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing” (op. cit.). It is unsurprising, therefore, that as among some philosophers, other recent literature on flourishing draws connections between the possession and exercise of virtues and the notions of happiness or well-being.⁷

⁶ See the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard <https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/>; the Institute for the Study of Human Flourishing at Oklahoma <http://www.ou.edu/flourish>; the Center for Theology, Science and Human Flourishing, at Notre Dame <https://ctshf.nd.edu/>; and the McHugh Program for Human Flourishing at Johns Hopkins <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/psychiatry/education/flourishing/>

⁷ See, for example, B. Frederickson and M. Losada ‘Positive Affect and the Complex Dynamics of Human Flourishing’ *American Psychologist* 60 (7), 2005; D. J. De Ruyter, ‘Pottering in the Garden: On Human Flourishing and Education’ *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 52 (4) 2004; M. Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary new Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* (New York: Atria, 2011) T. J. VanderWeele, ‘On the Promotion of Human Flourishing’ *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA*, available at <https://www.pnas.org/content/early/2017/07/12/1702996114>. Not all philosophers urging the claims of flourishing as an aim of education see it so closely linked to qualities of character. In his recent book *Flourishing as the Aim of Education: A Neo-Aristotelian View* (London: Routledge, 2020) Kristjan Kristjánsson argues for the insufficiency of character formation as an end of moral education while also rejecting the idea that good character is a necessary and sufficient condition for flourishing.

While welcoming this general direction of travel and endorsing a broad Aristotelianism we believe this approach faces serious challenges which need to be addressed before it can hope to be adopted across a range of educational contexts but particularly within schooling. These relate in broad terms to the *form* and to the *content* of statements concerning human flourishing and we identify and discuss these in turn in the following two sections. The appeal to flourishing as an aim of education is difficult is first and most abstractly because *flourishing* is a more logically complex and metaphysically substantial notion than is sometimes recognised; and second, because in the context of contested ends and purposes appeals to flourishing face some of the same challenges as do educational schemes intended to prepare for life and for death.

2. Making Sense of Flourishing

To begin with formal considerations, the logic of the predicate 'flourishing' is not simple. First it is an attributive term or concept in that its semantic sense depends upon the noun or verb to which it is attached. What it means to say that *x* or *x*'s ϕ ing 'is flourishing' (or 'is languishing') depends upon what '*x*' and (*x*'s) ' ϕ ing' refer to. Put non-linguistically flourishing relates necessarily to the *nature* of that which exhibits it, and it is for that reason that one cannot know that some thing (or some activity) is flourishing without knowing *what* it is. Moreover, the knowledge in question is usually quite rich and not simply observational. It can seem straight forward as when in seeing a cat limping or with patchy fur one judges that it is injured or ailing, but that is because someone who is in a position to identify the things in question and make such judgements has a 'prototypical' concept of a cat that involves the idea of it as a certain kind of living thing characterised by a complex of physiological and functional features and associated needs and activities.

Put in these terms this sounds the sort of thing that is the business of a vet or a cat specialist, but some degree of such knowledge is what comes implicitly to a child in the learning of the word 'cat' which is constitutively associated with a range of specifying generics: 'cats have four legs', 'cats have eyes and ears', 'cats have mouths', 'cats run', 'cats climb', 'cats see and hear', 'cats eat', 'cats purr' etc. Far from representing advanced cognitive attainments such generics begin to be acquired by children very readily at pre-school age and remain largely unmodified in later life.⁸ It is only because we have such conceptual resources that we can identify something 'x' as a cat and its 'ϕing' as an *activity* it is engaging in (in contrast to something it is undergoing as in shivering or falling), and it is only by reference to the same resources that we are able to make sense of the idea that x is flourishing or failing, or that x's behaviour is normal/abnormal, vigorous/infirm and so on.

The first point, then, is that we are not in a position to talk about making flourishing an aim in education unless we have some idea of the kind of thing whose flourishing is in question. The obvious answer may seem to be 'a human child' but this brings out a further feature relating to the nature of living things which is that their existence is *phasal*. The terms 'infant', 'toddler', 'child', 'pubescent', 'adolescent' etc., refer to proper, be they indeterminately-bounded stages in the development of a human being, and judgements as to whether an individual is flourishing often cannot be evaluated simply by reference to its being 'human' without taking account of its relevant stage. This relativity is made explicit by noting that such judgements are, like the earlier nature-dependent ones, logically reduplicative. That is to say their expanded form is 'x in-so-far-as-it-is-__ is f' where the space is filled by a species sortal term ('human being', 'cat' and so on) or by phase sortal ('infant', 'kitten', etc).

⁸ See S. Gelman *The Essential Child: Origins of Essentialism in Everyday Thought* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), and 'Learning words for kinds: Generic noun phrases in acquisition' in D. G. Hall & S. R. Waxman eds., *Weaving a Lexicon* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014).

The second point is that the logical relativity of judgements of flourishing is yet more extensive, since it relates not only to *kinds* and developmental *stages* but to *aspects* of the condition or activities of something instantiating these. Thus we get the form 'x in-so-far-as-it-is-__ is f in respect of g', e.g. 'Mary is so far as she is a human infant is flourishing in respect of walking'. One distinction between these dimensions is that whereas if a human individual is not flourishing as-an-infant or as-an-adolescent it is not flourishing as-a-human-being; but such an individual may be failing in one respect while flourishing in another as when a pupil may be flourishing in respect of language but failing with regard to mathematics. Here one might try to connect these aspects to a general conception of human life as such, concluding that someone who is failing in an important area, even if they succeeding in another cannot properly be said to be flourishing overall. We might term this the 'unity of flourishing' thesis by analogy with Socrates' claim in the *Protagoras* that 'virtue is one' (333b4). This introduces two possibilities: first, that doing well physically, intellectually, emotionally, in personal relationships, etc. (or whatever are deemed to be the relevant departments of life) are not instances but *parts* of flourishing simpliciter; second, and more radically, that they are neither instances nor parts but *manifestations* of a single condition. Both interpretations seem to exclude partial or progressive development but these may be accommodated if one thinks that flourishing, like virtue, is not an all or nothing matter and that the idea of flourishing simpliciter is an abstraction that may yet serve as a regulative ideal. While this addresses certain theoretical objections, however, it also serves to highlight the general point that to make judgements about flourishing we need to have a quite rich conception of human nature and a theory about its stages and primary aspects and about the relationships between these.

There is now a further point signaled by the repeated reference to nature. 'Naturalism' in ethics has been used to mark quite different views. One such is the idea that it is possible to infer from what and how things *do* occur in nature, an account of how they *ought* to go. Evidently this is a crude formulation and in some sophisticated versions it may not run afoul of familiar philosophical objections

to deriving 'ought' from 'is'. The present issue, however, is that it is unclear just what is to count as human nature, and hence what constitutes human flourishing. The point is not that it is distinguish between the essential from the accidental, the universal from the prevalent, and the permanent from the transient, assuming such contrasts to be applicable; rather it is that we often have a dual, two-dimensional conception of our nature. One is broadly *ethological* and emphasizes our animality, the other is *ethical* and stresses our moral and more broadly value-consciousness.⁹ At times these perspectives have been held apart and contrasted emphasizing the superiority of cultured rational humanity over biological constitution; but at others, and now is such a time, the continuity of animal and human life is emphasized: on the one hand by pointing to features of animal behaviour that appear analogous to human aesthetic and moral consciousness, and on the other by claiming to trace purportedly distinctive human behaviour to our evolutionary ancestors and from there back to more general animal characteristics.

Without going into the merit of these positions it is clear enough that we may think of human nature and thereby of human flourishing more or less in line with three perspectives: *ethologically* (in contrast to ethically), *ethically* (in contrast to ethologically) or '*etho-ethically*' seeking to integrate the two, perhaps by invoking ideas of continuity between first and second natures, or of elevated,

⁹ Recall in this connection Bernard Williams challenge to the neo-Aristotelian seeking to invoke for contemporary ethical theory the notions of human nature and human flourishing: "There is ... the figure, rarer perhaps than Calicles supposed, but real, who is horrible enough and not miserable at all but, by any ethological standard of the bright eye and the gleaming coat, dangerously flourishing. For those who want to ground the ethical life in psychological health, it is something of a problem that there can be such people at all" *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2006) p. 46. Another critic of certain kinds of ethological naturalism, though a defender of what he takes to be the real form of Aristotelian naturalism is John McDowell, see 'Two Sorts of Naturalism' in R. Hursthouse, G. Lawrence and W. Quinn eds., *Virtues and Reasons: Philippa Foot and Moral Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

transformed or rationally subsumed animality. Again, our aim here is not to resolve these challenges but to identify them as difficulties in the way of making flourishing the aim of education. One reason for thinking that they are not intrinsically intractable is that some educators have proceeded on the basis of implicit and sometimes explicit answers to them. Returning to the opening exchange between head teachers, part of what strikes us as vacuous about the first's talk of 'preparing [pupils] for life' is that it sounds complacent and superficial as if it were obvious and uncontentious what life is about. That impression may, however, be mistaken depending on how much was built into the speaker's idea of 'life'. By contrast, talk of preparing [pupils] for death' suggests that a rich and elevated anthropology is explicitly in mind suggesting a transcendent in contrast to a mundane conception of human existence, conjoining nature and destiny. However that may be, what is clear is that anyone who holds that education is for life and that life is for living well has to give an account of flourishing that addresses the plurivalent character of that concept and the question of how the various aspects may be if not integrated then ordered, and if not ordered then kept in balance, or if not that then variously catered for. To some extent the plurality of aspects of human well-being might be accommodated by forms of selection, streaming and specialization according to disposition, interest and aptitude, but it is not clear that this is so much an accommodation of difference within rather than abandonment of the idea of there being such a thing as *human flourishing*.

So much for formal issues, next we turn to practical ones though still within the scope of philosophy as we consider the difficulties of pursuing the end of human flourishing in education within the context of a liberal society.

3. Flourishing in a Liberal Society

Even if the formal and theoretical challenges that attend conceptions of human flourishing can be resolved, these conceptions still need determinate content if they are to be useful as guides for education or for social policy more broadly. Is it possible, therefore, to agree on a contentful, determinate and implementable conception of flourishing in a liberal society? The relevant issue at this point is not one of philosophical scepticism or the challenge of relativism, or of doubts about the practical feasibility of putting such a conception into effect, rather it relates to liberal objections to the advocacy of substantive notions of the good.

To begin with, any informative conception of flourishing is going to include some determinate list of human potentialities, capabilities, or what, in the context of considering flourishing as an educational goal, Kristjan Kristjansson terms “species-specific existential tasks”¹⁰. This is because claims about flourishing presuppose not only a view of what human beings actually *are* but of what they *can and should* do and be. To claim that a cat does not flourish because it cannot fly shows ignorance or confusion about the species-specific ‘tasks’ of cats. Similarly, to claim that a mature rose bush that has failed to produce a single flower is a “flourishing” rose plant, indicates ignorance about what rose bushes can and should do if they are doing well.

So any conception of flourishing that is determinate enough to be informative will also include some list of species-specific tasks or functions for human beings, what in translation of Aristotle’s *ergon* argument ¹¹ are more often referred to as ‘characteristic activities’ thereby avoiding the connotation of assigned purposes. In the context of education, this list of such activities will also guide educators in making hard decisions about materials, staffing, curricula, syllabi, and pedagogy. This is because if A is an activity that is structurally important to a flourishing life, on a given conception, then providing

¹⁰ See K. Kristjansson (2020) *Flourishing as the Aim of Education: A Neo-Aristotelian View*. New York: Routledge, p. 1.

¹¹ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1097b22–1098a20)

students with the skills and knowledge that they need to engage in A effectively will be understood as necessary for a good education. On the other hand, if A is not in the list of species-specific activities given by a conception of flourishing, then any resources that are necessary only for A but not for listed activities will not be justified uses of educators' time, efforts and resources. It is critical, therefore, that a conception include all and only activities (in a broad sense) that are in fact constitutive of good or flourishing human lives. Suppose that an educational institution were to endorse a conception on which a human being flourishes if and only if s/he is healthy and wealthy – but not necessarily wise. Given such an account, education will focus on professional marketable skills, physical fitness, and healthy eating. It will provide no justification for, say, art, music, or philosophy classes unless these can be shown to advance the aims of health and wealth. If, however, a conception includes something like aesthetic practice and self-examination in addition to health and wealth, then art and philosophy classes will be justified as important preconditions for the students' future flourishing.

This suggests a double challenge for any account of flourishing determinate enough to guide publicly funded and / or provided education in the context of a liberal society (what we will also term 'liberal education'). Every contentful conception of flourishing includes or implies either a correct or a false list of the existential tasks or activities characteristic of human life and well-being. If it includes an inaccurate list, then it is not a desirable guide for educational policy because it fails to prepare students to live well, that is to execute the existential tasks that will really confront them during their lives. If on the other hand it includes a correct list then from one point of view all is well, but it will, of course, be a matter of dispute as to whether it is indeed an accurate conception. That creates a practical problem but also, in the context a liberal society, a theoretical challenge related to that described by Rawls in his characterisation of the role of justice as fairness in dealing with difference and disagreement:

The aim of justice as fairness, then, is practical: it presents itself as a conception of justice that may be shared by citizens as a basis of a reasoned, informed, and willing political agreement. It expresses their shared and public political reason. But to attain such a shared reason, the conception of justice should be, as far as possible, independent of the opposing and conflicting philosophical and religious doctrines that citizens affirm. In formulating such a conception, political liberalism applies the principle of toleration to philosophy itself. ... Comprehensive philosophical and moral doctrines likewise cannot be endorsed by citizens generally, and they also no longer can, if they ever could, serve as the professed basis of a society.¹²

This is doubly relevant to the issue of aims in education in a liberal society. First, what is here said of justice in general can be applied to the issue of justice in the context of public schooling; but second it can be given immediate relevance by adapting it directly to the matter of flourishing as the goal of education as follows:

The aim of a liberal conception of flourishing as the end of education is practical: it presents itself as a conception that may be shared by citizens as a basis of a reasoned, informed, and willing educational practice. It expresses their shared and public reason. But to attain such a shared reason, the conception of flourishing as the end of education should be, as far as possible, independent of the opposing and conflicting philosophical and religious doctrines that citizens affirm. In formulating such a conception, educational liberalism applies the principle of toleration to philosophy itself. ...

What we know is that any substantial account of human flourishing will be controversial and therefore cannot meet the liberal condition, and that any conception that can satisfy that criterion will not be

¹² J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism: Expanded edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) pp. 9-10.

sufficiently substantial. So no conception of flourishing can do what we need it to do: provide a guide for educational policy that is both satisfying and uncontroversial.

If a conception does not include an accurate list of existential tasks then it is not a good guide for educational policy. For evidence of this, consider the *de facto* conception of flourishing that guides education in the United States today: something not readily distinguishable from the “health and wealth” conception mentioned earlier, though it might be more charitably characterized as a health-and-wealth-and-citizenship-and-autonomy-and-rewarding-social-relationships conception. Yet this short list of existential tasks – stay healthy and get wealthy – is both too much and too little for students to aim for in life. It is too much because no human being enjoys health, wealth, unencumbered autonomy and rewarding social relationships consistently over the course of an entire life. We are mortal, subject to suffering and illness, and vulnerable to physical, financial, and relational losses. Like a US prescription drug advertisement, this conception of flourishing entices us with the suggestion that a good human life is one spent riding one’s motorcycle up the coast of California,¹³ or sailing off Nantucket with one’s dog, or ‘romancing’ in later years. Yet one cannot help but hear the advertiser admit, sotto voce, that such flourishing is liable to come to an end in short order through unexpected bleeding, stroke, liver failure, and other serious side-effects liable to lead to death.

At the same time, however, the health and wealth conception is too little: human beings have other potentialities besides health, wealth, and riding our motorcycles up the coast of California. We are capable of self-sacrificial love, of contemplation of truth and beauty, of self-examination and self-transcendence. The health-and-wealth conception is fundamentally unsatisfying, therefore, because it

¹³ See Davis and Brotherton, “Human Flourishing Theory in Advertising: Case Studies” *Journal of Marketing Development and Competitiveness* 7.2 (2013): 83-94 for some examples. In addition to the motorcycling example, they also mention the “retirement on a white sand beach” conception (p. 89).

simultaneously overestimates and underestimates what human beings are capable of. Because it is both impossible and unsatisfying, educating children according to this account of flourishing leads them into twofold dissatisfaction. Students are dissatisfied because even when they achieve something like this for some length of time they recognise that they are capable of more but unsure of what “more” is; and equally dissatisfied when they are eventually faced with basic human realities like mortality, sickness, suffering, and loss. They are unprepared for the fact that these and other setbacks and sufferings must be part of even the most flourishing life, if it is a recognizably human life.

Yet it is apparent why liberal societies have tacitly agreed on such an unsatisfying health-and-wealth conception of flourishing. The reason is the first challenge, viz, that no fully satisfying and accurate list of human tasks is uncontroversial. But because every such conception includes at least a modicum of health and wealth – external and bodily goods that even Aristotle thought were necessary to a life of virtue – the health-and-wealth conception has emerged, despite its obvious inadequacy, as the result of our best attempt at a quasi-Rawlsian “overlapping consensus.”

Is it pessimistic to claim that any more satisfying conception must be controversial? After all, some liberal Aristotelians have offered sophisticated accounts of flourishing that are what Martha Nussbaum calls ‘thick, vague conceptions.’¹⁴ These understandings tend to feature various vague domains of flourishing, (e.g. ‘meaning and purpose,’ ‘character and virtue’ etc.¹⁵) but leave room for an individual to specify her own flourishing within each of the domains. Such conceptions usually include, for example, a social relationships domain, but with enough vagueness to allow for a variety of

¹⁴ See Nussbaum, “Aristotelian Social Democracy,” in *Liberalism and the Good*, ed. R. Bruce Douglass et. al. New York: Routledge, 1990.

¹⁵ See, for example, the Harvard Flourishing Measure in VanderWeele, T.J. (2017). On the promotion of human flourishing. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, U.S.A.*, 31:8148-8156. See also Doret J. DeRuyter (2004) “Pottering in the Garden? On Human Flourishing and Education”. *British Journal of Educational Studies* 52.4: 377-389.

relationships (e.g. with a deity, or with a spouse or partner, or with several casual friends, or in some versions with a pet, or with Nature conceived of in personal terms) to satisfy that domain. Nevertheless, even these “thick, vague conceptions” face the dilemma mentioned earlier. If they are adequate to real, fully human lives, then they are also controversial.

Consider, for example, that most of the more sophisticated theories include a “meaning and purpose” domain.¹⁶ That is, they acknowledge that humans are the kind of things with both the potential and the near-universal desire to find meaning and purpose in life, even (especially) in the face of mortality and suffering. These accounts are structurally good starting places for determinate conceptions of flourishing meant to guide education, because they get the list of existential tasks close to right. Yet once we understand the richness and complexity of these tasks, we are confronted with the need to equip students, not for largely pleasant lives of driving the Pacific Highway or sailing in Nantucket but for largely difficult ones marked by suffering and death. Such lives require meanings and purposes that transcend pain and extinction. The emotional, moral, rational, social, and spiritual skills needed to direct a course through suffering and towards death are entirely different from the skills required to navigate Nantucket in a fuzzy sweater. The suggestion is not that the aim of public education should be that proposed by one of Heads quoted at the outset, namely, preparation for death. Rather it is that a conception of flourishing that involves finding meaning and purpose in the face of suffering and death is going to require an entirely different set of educational preconditions from the health-and-wealth account.

Furthermore, the preconditions for the richer understanding are likely to come into tension with liberal commitments. For example, we have suggested that any satisfying account of flourishing will

¹⁶ See Kristjan Kristjansson (2020) *Flourishing as the Aim of Education: A Neo-Aristotelian View*. New York: Routledge. See also DeRuyter (2004), VanderWeele (2017).

acknowledge the importance of meaning and purpose in human life. But as sociologist Paul Froese has recently pointed out, having a sense of meaning and of purpose in life are negatively correlated with identifying as “liberal” or with living in an advanced liberal society.¹⁷ Froese’s explanation for this is that access to meaning and purpose presupposes belonging to a community animated by and directed towards those values. Before an individual can ascribe meaning and purpose to his life, he needs to live in company that makes those ‘existential’ concepts available to him.¹⁸ This suggests at least one way in which an education towards flourishing must go against basic liberal commitments, at least as these are widely quoted. If flourishing involves meaning and purpose, then schooling towards that end requires providing the preconditions for finding meaning and purpose. One of those preconditions is precisely immersion in a non-liberal community, that is, a community that endorses a coherent set of meaning concepts rich enough to render life, death, and suffering intelligible and purposeful. Such a community cannot eschew Rawls’s “comprehensive doctrines,” because such doctrines, or at least the concepts that comprise them, are ones that students need precisely as means for pursuing the central, human existential task, or characteristic activity, of finding meaning. So if education is to provide the conceptual and normative preconditions for aiming at flourishing then it cannot be ‘liberal,’ at least not in the proclaimed Rawlsian sense. This suggests a further reason to those already set out to conclude that any attempt at a genuinely adequate education for flourishing is bound to be controversial and hence apparently inadmissible as a form of liberal education.

4. Moving forward

¹⁷ Paul Froese (2016). *On Purpose: How We Create the Meaning of Life*. Oxford University Press, p. 5-6 and Figure 1.1, pp. 48-54 and Maps 3.1-3.3.

¹⁸ Froese (2016) p. 13.

In the brief review of attempts to substitute for traditional forms of moral and religious education and instruction, two contrasting strategies were mentioned. The first looked outward in search of *de facto* universal values, while the second looked inward to whatever values a child may already have. One might term these ‘objective-anthropological’ and ‘subjective-psychological’ approaches, respectively. One problem with the former is that it secures plausibility in speaking of ‘universal values’ by ascending to a high level of abstraction from specific cultures and forms of life, raising a question about how to connect these ‘universals’ to the circumstances and experiences of particular groups of children. On the other hand, starting with children themselves, with the aim of helping them clarify their values, tends to involve selecting and imposing appropriate attitudes, or else inculcating a basic subjectivism.

These problems notwithstanding, there is something right about the outward and inward perspectives. The first corrects the tendency of the second to individualistic relativism, while the second takes seriously the idea that moral education (or whatever one chooses to call developing childrens’ capacity for acting well) has to cultivate autonomous value-consciousness. Consider by way of analogy the dual aim of an art, or music, or poetry teacher to introduce children to works of high quality while also seeking to develop relevant sensibilities in them that might shape their own painting, playing, or writing. A question, then, for any proposed form of value education is whether and how it might bring together outward and inward perspectives. Education for flourishing seems well placed in respect of ‘whether’, since the flourishing of self-conscious, rational agents involves both ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ aspects. For a voluntary agent to flourish through his or her intentional activity requires self-direction in the light of perceived goods (and the avoidance of perceived evils); but it requires as well that the perceptions be largely veridical and that activities be largely in accord with those perceptions. Of course, it also depends upon the circumstances of life being generally favourable and that will often be beyond the control of the agent. Even the ideal of a maximally flourishing human life is going to be, at its untroubled best, thriving aspectually rather than *in toto*, and more generally it will be marked by

the fact or permanent possibility of suffering, loss and failure, and the certainty of death. Yet even where circumstances are disadvantageous, self-direction in the light of objective goods will make life subjectively and objectively better than it otherwise would be. As well as being more substantial and purposeful than scouting for validation in *de facto* trans-cultural norms, or in restricting reference to values to those supposedly already possessed by pupils, promoting flourishing is also an improvement on 'happiness' as a goal of education, because conceptually it reaches more deeply into human nature and corresponds to the desire for genuine meaning and value, beyond satisfaction or contentment.

All of this said, a twofold difficulty remains. First, we have to proceed in light of the logic of flourishing: recognising and accommodating its attributivity, phasal-relatedness, and aspectuality. Second, implementing a substantial conception of it as an aim of schooling (beyond avowedly flourishing-oriented communities) is going to require some consensus on human nature. A somewhat partisan way of putting the last point would be to say that a trend toward making flourishing an aim of education will likely and properly lead to affirming the communitarian claim that contemporary liberalism is wedded to an impoverished anthropology. There are two reasons, however, to eschew that assertion: first, the pragmatic consideration that it is more likely to encourage resistance than conversion among those with whom one is likely to be in discussion; but second, and more importantly, that it leaves unaddressed the practically as well as theoretically important matter of how one might actually proceed in schooling if one believes that neutrality is too little and disingenuous, and partiality is too much and presumptuous. What, then, may be a way forward?

There is a line of thought identifiable in different forms and in different degrees of explicitness in a range of twentieth century cultural and philosophical thinkers of whom Chesterton, Davidson, Eliot, MacIntyre and Wittgenstein are leading proponents. In broad terms it is anti-empiricist, anti-individualistic, dialogical and anthropological. Firstly, it denies that understanding is built up out of sense-perception, arguing instead that experience is shaped from the earliest stages of consciousness

and movement by induction into forms of life, primarily through the teaching of language in the context of other activities. As Chesterton puts it: “There is, indeed, in each living creature a collection of forces and functions; but education means producing these in particular shapes and training them to particular purposes, or it means nothing at all. Speaking is the most practical instance of the whole situation. ... you will wait and watch very patiently indeed before you draw the English language out of [a child]. That you have got to put into him”.¹⁹

Secondly, and relatedly it maintains that thought, in contrast to mere sensuous consciousness, and *a fortiori* evaluative thought depends upon membership of a suitably active community. Thirdly, and again relatedly, it notes that such communities engage in asking, answering and challenging answers to basic questions about what is good and what is bad. Further, that this asking and answering is internally related in the sense that what is proposed presupposes an antecedent position. Fourthly, that we are parts and products of the natural world and hence that in understanding our natures we cannot rely, in the manner of Plato, Augustine, and Descartes on a purely first-person phenomenological account of what it is to be the kind of thing that we are, but must put this into the mix with second and third person accounts both informal and everyday, and those derived from systematic studies of a natural historical, psychological and sociological sorts.

One way of applying this set of ideas, having in view the aim of promoting flourishing via the cultivation of capacities the practised exercise of which will contribute to it; and seeking, as part of that aim, to conjoin inward and outward looking perspectives, is to structure classes around forms of joint

¹⁹ G.K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with World* (London: Cassell, 1908) Part IV, 'Education: Or the Mistake about the Child' Ch. 5 'An Evil Cry'. For the others see Donald Davidson, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); T.S. Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley* (New York: Farrar Strauss, 1964), Alasdain MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), and Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* 3rd edition trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford Blackwell, 1968).

enquiry into aspects of human life where the task is to understand the point and value of them. There is a tendency to oppose training in skills and techniques to immersion in matters of substance; but these are, as it were, contraries rather than contradictories, for there is a third possibility, (and perhaps more besides) which is that engaging in skilled practices is itself an engagement with substantial business. To revert to an earlier example, a training in art or music or poetry involves acquiring certain skills but these are not separable from studying, understanding and making things intended to have meaning and value, not just in some formal aesthetic sense but in a manner that engages more broadly with common experience and the shared sense of good and bad in human life. Unless this were so these arts would not exist in the forms that we know them, or receive the respect and attention they do. Recognising this suggests that education for flourishing should not be thought of as a special component within the curriculum but should be pervasive through most if not all of it, and also that the avowed 'official' liberal concern not to teach in accord with particular conceptions of the human good is continuously and inevitably undermined by educational practice. First, because such a concern is itself an expression of a conception of the human moral and political good: acting socially with respect for the individual's autonomy; but second, because it is incompatible with the content of a curriculum that includes art and design, citizenship, history, geography, languages, mathematics, science, and physical education, as most curricula do. Moreover, as Chesterton writing in another place put it:

[E]very education teaches a philosophy; if not by dogma then by suggestion, by implication, by atmosphere. Every part of that education has a connection with every other part. If it does not all combine to convey some general view of life, it is not

education at all. And the modern educationists, the modern psychologists, the modern men of science, all agree in asserting and reasserting this ...²⁰

The situation then appears to be that the liberal challenge to educating towards flourishing based on a conception, or what Chesterton terms a 'philosophy', of life is not so much a challenge to the advocates of such a view as it is to the advocates of liberal neutrality themselves, which is to say a challenge to make their view compatible with any kind of education. That said, it remains to be reasoned and argued where to strike the balance between the inculcation of practices directed towards flourishing and respect for autonomy and self-determination; but again that is itself re-expressible in terms of a particular view of what is involved in flourishing and in acting to promote it. What is likely to remain unresolved is whether education should properly be thought of as a preparation for life or for death but that is a question that can be left for further discussion on another occasion.

²⁰ G.K. Chesterton, Excerpt from 'The New Case For Catholic Schools', *America*, August 9, 1930.