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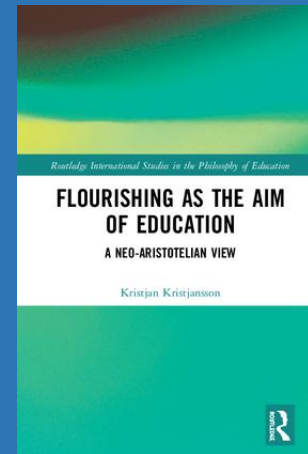
THE JUBILEE CENTRE
FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

Four Accounts of Flourishing as the Aim of Education: A Synthesis – and 10 Remaining Problems

Kristján Kristjánsson
Deputy Director
Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues
k.kristjansson@bham.ac.uk

Further reading:

Kristjánsson, K. (2020). *Flourishing as the Aim of Education: A Neo-Aristotelian View*. London: Routledge



Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, University of Birmingham, UK <https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk>



A neo-Aristotelian centre with over 20 members of staff – making substantial use of the VIA and other positive educational resources

A Question of Character <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NvOI6riltzw>

Gratitude in Britain

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kfPEzPA_XnU

University of Birmingham School:

<http://www.universityschool.bham.ac.uk/>

<http://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/2014/dec/07/university-free-school-school-private>

MA in Character Ed. (fully online, the only one in the world, intake of 50 per year):

<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/postgraduate/courses/distance/edu/character-education.aspx#CourseDetailsTab>



So what is 'positive education'?

Any educational approach that adapts the teachings of positive psychology to educational practice (primary, secondary, tertiary education, CPD, life-coaching, etc...)

Recommended reading:

Knoop, H. H. (2016).

The eudemonics of education.

In J. Vittersø (Ed.),

Handbook of eudaimonic well-being (pp. 453–471).

Dordrecht: Springer.



The emergence of a new paradigm of flourishing



Popular new paradigm of **flourishing** as the overall aim of education, e.g.

- Brighthouse: ‘the purpose of education is to promote human flourishing’
- White: schools, above anything else, as ‘seedbeds of human flourishing’
- de Ruyter focuses on the universal hopes of parents that ‘their children will lead a flourishing life’
- **Problem 1: But these are not Aristotelians but liberals!** In addition: A number of Aristotelian educational philosophers making similar claims: Carr, Curren, Sanderse, Kristjánsson... Also SDT (Ryan and Deci) and positive psychologists (Seligman)
- **Problem 2: So how do these groups differ in their understanding of flourishing? Is their common language worrisome?**

Consensus: Flourishing as an account of objective well-being



Well-being/Happiness

Subjective accounts: the criteria of well-being subjective in the sense that they have to do with psychological states (experiences, attitudes, feelings, beliefs) of an agent. Further divided up into **hedonic** accounts and **life-satisfaction** accounts. **Objections:** Happiness pill and happy slave

Objective accounts: the criteria of well-being have to do with objective features of the agent – facts about her life – that can, in principle, be viewed from outside. Example: **Eudaimonic** (flourishing) accounts. But flourishing is also said to be accompanied by a sort of pleasure (flow). **Objection:** Paternalistic to tell someone he/she is happy!

Pros and cons of the four flourishing accounts on the aims of education



1. Original Aristotelian account/neo-Aristotelian accounts

↑ Flourishing an inherently moral, rational (but emotion-imbued) communal activity

↓ Lack of attention to individual purpose/meaning and transcendent experiences (such as awe, elevation)

2. Liberal accounts

↑ Autonomously driven activity, adjusted to individual purpose

↓ Failure to account for universal character strengths and virtues

3. Self-determination theory

↑ Psychological needs and motivations to flourish

↓ Actualisation of rational capacities

4. Positive education

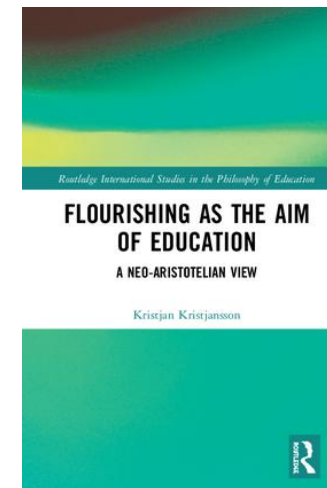
↑ Self-transcendent experiences (awe, elevation) and meaning (PM from PERMA)

↓ Normative grounding (in the valuable, not only generally valued) and lack of an integrator like *phronesis*

↓ Lack of attention to the fact that many ch. strengths and virtues are painful and encumbered and that many morally positive emotions are negative in terms of valence (Paul Wong's point!)

My book aims at a synthesis...

- Ameliorate the weaknesses in the Aristotelian account (my **starting point!**) and bring it up to date while elaborating on its strengths
- Accommodate insights from positive education, esp. regarding enchanted transcendent experiences and spirituality (not the same as religiosity!)
- Identify various unsolved problems in the new synthetic account and suggest the next steps (conceptual, empirical or both) towards solving them



A very common assumption: Flourishing–happiness concordance thesis

Problem 3: But surely these do not always go hand in hand:



	<i>Flourishing</i>	<i>Not flourishing</i>
<i>Happiness</i>	Positive concordance (in line with the concordance thesis)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Torn Artist • The Happy Slave • (The Successful Sadist)
<i>Not happiness</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Miserable Thinker • The Philistine Do-Gooder • (The Disgust-Tainted Flourisher) 	Negative concordance (in line with the concordance thesis)



The problem of blandness/triteness...

平淡

[absurdity, bland, dull,
blandness, faintness dull,
unexcited, wateriness]

Problem 4: A threat of *bland truisms* hovers constantly over educational accounts of flourishing, just like positive education

Like motherhood we are all for it...

The concept of flourishing becomes like a shopping trolley that everybody can fill with his or her random choice of goods. The variables in the definition will have to be populated with sufficient specificity to prevent the account of flourishing from becoming bland and – as philosophers of science would put it – ‘undisconfirmable’.

Obviousness is not only a cause of weariness; it dissipates salience...

My attempt at specificity in the book...

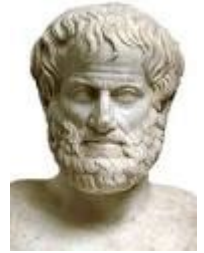
Human flourishing is **the (relatively) unencumbered, freely chosen and developmentally progressive activity of a meaningful (subjectively purposeful and objectively valuable) life that actualises satisfactorily an individual human being's natural capacities in areas of species-specific existential tasks at which human beings (as rational, social, moral and emotional agents) can most successfully excel**

specificity

I then spell out **each variable** individually...

I finally offer **food for thought** for teachers and other educators

Neo-Aristotelian or just **not** Aristotelian?

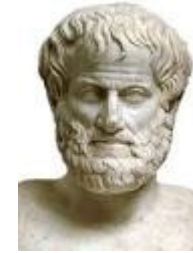


I arguing that the 'good life' of the student, to which education should contribute, must

- involve engagement with self-transcendent ideals and ignite awe-filled enchantment in ways that go well beyond, and even clash with, traditional Aristotle-inspired conceptions of *eudaimonia*
- allow for moral elevation and radical gestalt-switches (epiphanic psycho-moral conversions) of kinds that are bound to appear alien to orthodox Aristotelians
- My conception is more demanding than Aristotle's, e.g. by postulating that the flourishing agent must have a clear personal sense of meaning
- In other ways, it is less demanding, for example by assuming that people need not be fully virtuous to flourish satisfactorily (e.g. being well 'self-controlled' can suffice) and that flourishing need not necessarily be accompanied by subjective well-being

Problem 5: Are you not saddling Aristotle's system with alien elements – such as an other-worldly realm of transcendence or a cheapened version of spirituality – that undermine the credibility of the overarching, if flexible, Aristotelian architectonic of flourishing that you wish to preserve?

Problem 6: Are standard accounts of flourishing flat and 'disenchanted'?

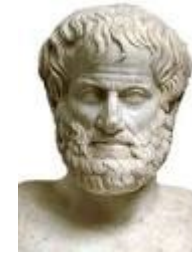


It is sometimes complained that some sides of human nature are largely unexplored by Aristotle, sides such that, in addition to being rational, we are also **spiritual beings**, responsive to beauty, imaginatively creative, without awareness of which any account of human nature becomes deflated and incomplete

Latter-day theorists have identified those missing parts in human beings' deep-seated orientation or urge – sometimes referred to as 'a transcendent urge' – towards extraordinary, idealised experiences of the **true, good and beautiful**. This urge is revealed in the inter-human **aesthetic** impulse and a strong drive towards some sort of **spirituality**. One could even argue that the desire for getting high on **drugs** – especially psychedelic drugs – has the same psychological (or biological) origin

Here, Aristotelianism lags behind **Confucianism** with its aesthetic appreciation of 'Heaven' (*Tiān*) and the 'Way' (*Dào*).

The problem may lie in Aristotle's emotion theory



Aristotle gives a prominent role to emotions in the actualisation of *eudaimonia*

When one looks at the emotions that Aristotle describes, however, those fall broadly into three categories with respect to their targets: emotions directed at **oneself** (like pride), at **other people** (like compassion) or at **external events** (like fear). Notably missing from this list are any emotions directed at **ideals or idealisations**, such as beauty, truth and goodness in the abstract. There is no **awe**, for example – either inspired by a heightened sense of beauty in art/nature, the mystic immensity of the universe or the unconditional goodness of an act of self-sacrifice

Aristotle does not appreciate the relevance for flourishing of what **Maslow** saw as top-of-the-pyramid 'peak experiences'

Can positive education help with enchantment? (Spoiler: only partly...)

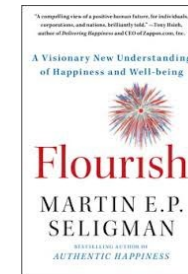
PM from the PERMA Model go beyond neo-Aristotelian conceptions of flourishing

P = Positive emotions, esp. here **appreciation of beauty and excellence** as one of the 24 VIA strengths under the virtue of **transcendence**:

Awe and elevation (awe at moral goodness)

M = Meaning as individual **student purpose**

However, still a number of problems here that Paul Wong has identified (need for PP 2.0)! Not only positive valence in awe and transcendence...



Problem 7: What should teachers do about enchantment?



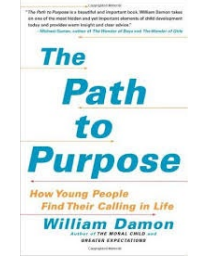
If we acknowledge this criticism, schools need to create spaces in which children can find an outlet for the sensibilities that throb in their nerves towards **'peak experiences'**

Teachers should expose students to experiences where they are most likely to come into contact with the **ideals of truth, beauty and goodness**.

Legends, fairy tales and folk stories will provide an important initial resource in this regard

Radically put, if the transcendental urge is really part of the human function, teachers working within the paradigm of education for flourishing have a duty to help students experience emotions of **aesthetic ecstasy and moral and intellectual elevation**. In order to do so, they need to help students keep an open mind, explore new ways of seeing, encourage personal awareness and inform them of research into the nature and impact of peak experiences

Damon's research on student meaning



William Damon is the preeminent scholar on meaning and purpose in classroom contexts

Damon (2008) and his colleagues surveyed over twelve hundred young people between the ages of 12 and 26, interviewing a quarter of them in depth. The findings revealed that:

- Only 20% of the interviewees were **fully purposeful**
- Approximately 25% were **dreamers**, with purposeful aspirations but little effort to act upon them
- About 30% were **dabblers**, who had tried to imbue their school work and life with meaning in various ways but without ever finding their niche
- 25% were **disengaged**, showing virtually no purpose or meaning-searching aspirations

External necessities for flourishing

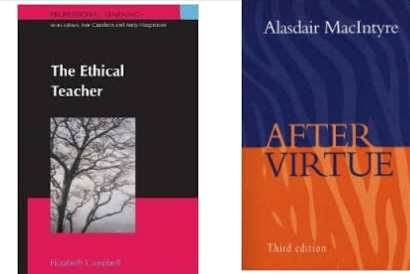


A lot of emphasis on those in Aristotle: people who maintain that we can flourish 'when we...fall into terrible misfortunes, provided that we are good...are talking nonsense' (Different from Confucianism, Stoicism, Buddhism)

We need:

- *Close parental attachment and good upbringing/education*
- *Good government, ruling in the interests of the people, and a just constitution*
- *Enough wealth to make sure we do not suffer poverty*
- *A complete life: namely, a life in which we do not die prematurely*
- *Health, strength and even minimal physical beauty*
- *Friends and family*

Problem 8: What should teachers do about the external necessities?



We know at least 20% of children in the world do not have the external necessities to flourish at school

Very divided opinions - **Elizabeth Campbell**: Teachers should just be good classroom role models, not agents of social change. **Alasdair MacIntyre**: Teachers should be agents of social change and fight for educational opportunities for all, but as this is hopeless in today's capitalist world, teaching is a forlorn, tragic profession – very pessimistic view!

My middle-ground position: Teachers must be committed, as professionals, to make their voices heard about lack of external necessities affecting young learners, but that does not necessarily turn them into social-justice activists of the kind that Campbell resents

Problem 9: How much curricular change is really needed?



- Education for flourishing is meant to **permeate the whole curriculum** and influence every salient educational decision taken within the school
- How far-reaching the practical implications of such a change of compass would be is **controversial**, however
- John White thinks that education for flourishing necessitates the tearing up of the whole curriculum, as carved up into discrete subjects, and its restructuring along the lines of **general educational aims**. Despite his radicalism, White is optimistic that the ‘advent of the well-being school may be closer than we think’

Problem 10: Are teachers ready for this role?



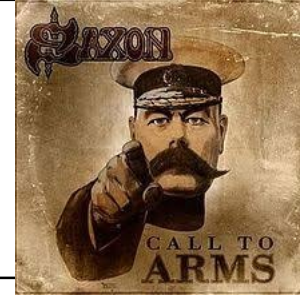
It would be a mistake to think that a new role as a facilitator of flourishing will come easily to the average teacher

Recent empirical literature teems with examples, from all over the world, of how badly teachers deem themselves prepared for tackling life's biggest questions in the classroom. They complain about **lack of attention to normative issues in teacher training**, and about their **own lack of moral language and moral identity**

As Chris Higgins correctly observes, 'restoring to its central place the flourishing of the practitioner is the first step in constructing a virtue ethics of teaching' (2011)

In other words, before teachers can help students answer adequately the question of what kind of persons they want to become, in order to fulfil their potential, the teachers themselves need more extensive training in **how to ask and answer such questions about themselves**, both at the professional and personal levels

My call to arms...



Until recently, flourishing (*eudaimonia*) was rarely discussed outside of the hermetically sealed hothouse of Aristotelian **philosophy**

Recently, hordes of academic **psychologists, esp. positive psychologists**, have come on board, although their embrace of the basic tenets of *eudaimonic* philosophy is sometimes hesitant or skewed

At present, **educationists** and **educators** are joining the party also

Some academic trends become abortive while others continue to catch on. I appeal to you, dear colleagues, to help move the flourishing discourse forward in order to make it **enrich educational policy and practice**