

Flourishing as the aim of Character Education

El florecimiento como fin de la Educación del Carácter

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Abstract:

Human flourishing is a term that relates to the full development of people and societies, something we all long for, especially in times of crisis. It is widely accepted that education is an indispensable resource to promote human flourishing. The main aim of this article is to investigate whether human flourishing can be considered as the aim of character education in the virtues development approach. Publications on the subject of flourishing have proliferated in recent years. For this study we select ones that link flourishing and the aim of moral education from the perspective of the philosophy and theory of education, developed in the Anglo-American field. Assertions by David Carr (2021) and Kristján Kristjánsson (2020) on the subject of flourishing and character education provide a starting point and guide for the discussion that mainly revolves around the following questions. What notion of flourishing can be theoretically sustained as an educational goal? Why is character education not considered sufficient to promote

flourishing? Why is it not considered necessary either? We conclude by underlining the value of educational theory based on a realistic view of flourishing as an attainable aim of character education. Some essential components of flourishing and moral education are absent from the theories reviewed.

Keywords: moral education, moral development, moral values, educational aim, educational philosophy, educational theory.

Resumen:

El florecimiento humano es un término relacionado con el desarrollo pleno de personas y sociedades, algo anhelado por todos, especialmente en tiempos de crisis. Es aceptado globalmente que la educación es un recurso imprescindible para promover el florecimiento humano. El objetivo principal de este artículo es indagar sobre si se puede plantear como fin de la Educación del Carácter, con el enfoque de desarrollo de las virtudes, el florecer humano.

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Las publicaciones sobre el tema del florecimiento han proliferado en los últimos años. Para este estudio seleccionamos aquellas que relacionan florecimiento y fin de la educación moral desde la perspectiva de la filosofía y teoría de la educación, desarrolladas en el ámbito anglo-americano. Algunas afirmaciones de David Carr (2021) y Kristján Kristjánsson (2020) sobre el tema del florecimiento y de la educación del carácter, son punto de partida y guía de la discusión que gira principalmente sobre las siguientes cuestiones: ¿qué noción de florecimiento puede sostenerse teóricamente como fin educativo?, ¿por qué

no se considera a la educación del carácter suficiente para promover el florecimiento?, ¿por qué tampoco se aprecia necesaria? Concluimos subrayando el valor de la teoría educativa fundamentada en una visión realista del florecimiento como objetivo alcanzable de la educación del carácter. En las teorías revisadas, falta considerar algunos componentes esenciales del florecimiento y de la educación moral.

Descriptor: educación moral, desarrollo moral, valores morales, objetivo educativo, filosofía educacional, teoría educacional.

1. Introduction

The central subject of this study is a question that is considered in the area of the philosophy and theory of education in current discussions about flourishing as the aim of moral education that are taking place in the Anglo-American sphere. *FloreCIMIENTO* (flourishing) is not commonly used as a term in Spanish for discussing educational objectives. The words *desarrollo* (development) and *creCIMIENTO* (growth) are closest in meaning to flourishing in pedagogy. Nonetheless, the influence on this topic of studies written in English has meant that flourishing is being used as a concept more often in pedagogical research in Spanish. Human flourishing includes the development of people and the development of societies: people cause and need the prosperity of societies, and societies improve if their members have the capacity and commitment to contribute to social development. For this reason, we pay special pedagogical

attention to the importance of human action in flourishing (Meirieu, 2021; Pérez & Millán, 2021).

We focus on studies into character education, which is a part of moral education (Arthur et al., 2016) that centres its attention on promoting virtues. Other character-education focuses that do not consider the virtues merit a separate study owing to the importance of their contributions, but to do so would go beyond the limited scope of this article. For more information about these different approaches, see Naval et al. (2017). Our principal aim is to answer this question: Can character education have flourishing as an aim?

The words of two distinguished authors from the field of character education guide the path of this study. The thesis of Carr (2021) holds that the concept of flourishing is useless and there is no point presenting it as an aim of education in

virtues. Therefore, in the second section of this article we ask which concepts of human flourishing play a role in influencing character education, and in the subsequent section we consider whether the notions of flourishing that the authors propose as an objective of education have sufficient consistency from the perspective of educational theory.

Kristjánsson (2020a, 2020b) is the author of two ideas that have also surprised us and to which we dedicate the fourth and fifth sections of this article. These are: education for flourishing is not the same as character education; and character education is neither sufficient nor necessary to drive education towards human flourishing.

We consider psychology's contributions to this topic. The impact of psychology on education, and currently on character education and moral education as well, has not gone unnoticed in studies of the philosophy and theory of education given that they reflect the discussions taking place among theorists of psychology and philosophy on educational topics, such as human flourishing (Bauer et al., 2018; Fower, 2016; Annas et al., 2016; Narváez, 2018; Curren, 2020; Wright et al., 2021).

These interdisciplinary exchanges have a common note, the influence of neo-Aristotelianism. There are constant references to Aristotle with different purposes: seeking inspiration in him, working creatively on applying his theory to new questions, and procuring a hermeneutics that is faithful to his thinking. While we do take

this philosophical framework into account, it is not the aim of this study to observe the scope of the inspiration, interpretation, and creativity of Aristotelian ideas in these authors' statements. While the production is very broad, we can only consider a selection of publications and we focus on those that are most closely related to the questions we intend to answer.

2. Flourishing as an educational objective

The surprising question that David Carr uses as the title of one of his recent publications (2021) has motivated the task of understanding the scope of how the concept of flourishing is used as the object of analysis in educational theory. This title is: *Where's the educational virtue in flourishing?* He answers by saying: "(...) that the currently vaunted notion of flourishing is trivial to the point of vacuity and can therefore serve no useful (theoretical) educational purpose" (Carr, 2021, p. 391). Carr shows his disagreement with the approach to the concept of flourishing that is currently used in the fields of the ethics of virtues, character education, and moral psychology. His reflection leads us to ask: To what notion of flourishing do theorists of education turn? What notion of flourishing can be theoretically useful?

2.1. Concepts of human flourishing used in education

Flourishing as a concept used in the social sciences and health sciences is synonymous with happiness and well-being. Use of the expressions flourishing, optimal, fruitful, successful, and good life is more

common. Understanding what produces well-being in life has added more content to what was previously thought, and we have found various focuses and theories of the flourishing life (Alexandrova & Fabian, 2022). This identification between flourishing and well-being is the one that is present in the debate about flourishing as an educational objective.

Studies into well-being or flourishing make a basic distinction between hedonic well-being (the well-being of a pleasurable life) and *eudaimonic* well-being (the well-being of a good, valuable, meaningful life) (Vittersø, 2016). At the same time, we find the categories of subjective well-being and objective well-being. The former refers to what people perceive and express as well-being, normally established by applying evaluation tools. Objective well-being is a notion through which an effort is made to identify the elements that comprise well-being for all people because they are human (VanderWeele, 2017; Kristjánsson, 2020a, 2020b).

The concept of flourishing in the theoretical discussion that we consider corresponds with the conception of happiness as *eudaimonia* and to *eudaimonic* well-being; scholars of this topic are part of the current of neo-Aristotelianism, and, as a reference concept, turn to the idea of *eudaimonia* from Aristotelian philosophy. Power's explanation (2016), which we present below, introduces the ideas of *eudaimonia* that are commonly at play when flourishing is presented as an objective of education. The Aristotelian concept of *eudaimonia* is an ethical notion because it

means a type of life, a good life, the best life that people can achieve insofar as it depends on them, on what they choose to do, and actually achieve. Life is action, it comprises and proceeds through the exercise of a variety of activities and achieving goods, in accordance with the human, animal rational, and political (social) mode of being. *Eudaimonia* is hoped for from a complete life, over the course of one's lifespan, it is desired and wanted for itself, without expecting anything more or greater than it, which is why it is called the ultimate aim.

Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia* has also inspired the presentation of *eudaimonic* well-being as an educational goal. This expression places the accent on well-being, that is to say, on the satisfaction that people sense that they achieve in their lives, which is closely related to the experience of each individual. With the adjective *eudaimonic*, the authors note that people encounter well-being in the realisation of a variety of activities, not just the pursuit of pleasure in their lives. *Eudaimonic* well-being is not just hedonic well-being.

Eudaimonic well-being can be identified with subjective well-being (people report that they are satisfied with the components of *eudaimonia*) and with objective well-being (the components of *eudaimonia* common to all human beings are described), or with a combination of both. Kristjánsson (2020b) gives Seligman's latest theory as an example of the fusion of objective and subjective well-being. This provides the foundations and focus for interventions and research from the

perspective of positive psychology that seek to promote happiness and well-being. To flourish, according to Seligman it is necessary to strengthen these elements: “Positive emotion (...) Engagement (...) Relationships (...) Meaning (...) Achievement” (2011, p. 24). People who have these elements in their lives perceive that they are happy and feel satisfied. Positive education, which is based on positive psychology, has as its goal the promotion of well-being in schools and helping students to flourish.

Another example of fusion between objective and subjective well-being with reference to *eudaimonic* well-being is the concept of flourishing or psychological well-being used in self-determination theory (Ryan & Martela, 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2017): to flourish, it is necessary to satisfy basic psychological needs and develop an optimal psychological functioning.

Optimal psychological functioning can be regarded as the objective dimension of flourishing and recalls Aristotle’s (2009) argument that the properly human activity or action is a good that forms an essential part of the good life or *eudaimonia*. But it is no more than a slight similarity. In general, theories of psychological well-being regard as good a psychological functioning that makes it possible to live with health and lead the life that each person chooses, achieving the proposed targets. Moral goods or values are not explicitly presented as components of a good life (Haybron & Tiberius, 2015; Miller, 2017), and yet it is precisely because of this absence of the moral that this dimension of flourishing proposed as an objective of education is ac-

cepted without reservations by a majority of theorists and educators.

One example of a more complete vision of flourishing is the proposal by VanderWeele (2017), director of the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University, the centre of reference in research into flourishing. He adds the moral dimension to the other components described in the conception of flourishing from positive psychology or self-determination theory. VanderWeele proposes five domains to evaluate the extent of people’s well-being: happiness and satisfaction with life, physical and mental health, meaning and purpose (in life and activity), character and virtue, and intimate or close social relations. These domains satisfy two criteria: they are aims in themselves and are universally desired. Both criteria evoke the Aristotelian concept of *eudaimonia* as the ultimate goal of human life (Aristotle, 2009). This more objective, complete, and generalisable vision of flourishing enables educational theory to understand that it is reasonable to propose flourishing as an aim of education.

The conceptions of flourishing used in psychology and which are being proposed as an educational aim, could be summarised thus:

(...) a natural process of personal maturation and socialisation culminating in the achievement of a satisfying psychosocial identity, and as driven by various psychosocial needs—for self-esteem, for self-actualisation and personal growth, for affiliation and intimacy, and for mastery and achievement. (Miller, 2017, p. 786)

The most widely used concept of flourishing in educational theory is identified with the actualisation of human potential. Are these concepts of flourishing sufficiently substantial for it to be presented as an aim of education?

3. The theory of flourishing as objective of education

The theory of education casts light on how to educate in view of the educational aim or aims. The theory that argues for the meaning of education for flourishing, must explain a conception of it that can be used as an educational objective (Wolbert et al., 2019). Flourishing understood as the development of human potential in the performance of meaningful and excellent activities, is theoretically, for Carr (2021), a “poorly specified objective”; it does not serve to direct education as a practical activity. Nonetheless, authors who elaborate a conception of flourishing that can be presented as an educational aim, understand that is theoretically useful to embody an idea that is objective enough to be universally accepted, as happens when flourishing is identified with something as broad as developing human potential.

The need to promote good psychological functioning through education in order to lead a good life is something that is obvious to educators (Curren, 2020). Specifying the elements of flourishing so that they can be translated into concrete objectives that mark a direction for educational practices is a reflection that should be done in a second moment, based on a broad and general concept of flourishing,

and it requires us to bear in mind the social and cultural contexts and other personal characteristics of the learners.

Wolbert, De Ruyter, and Schinkel (2019) believe that any conception of human flourishing must combine the following criteria if it is to be suggested as an objective of education: its content can be regarded as inherently valuable and refers to the actualisation of human potential; it comprises a full life; it consists of a dynamic status; and it presupposes objective goods. According to these criteria, his own definition of flourishing could be given as an example: “(...) living an optimal life, in which people are free enough to make their own choices, fill their time with meaningful and successful activities and relationships, and feel happy or satisfied with that” (Wolbert et al., 2021, p. 699). On the same lines, Kristjánsson proposes this notion, adding the moral dimension of human flourishing:

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. (2020a, p. 1)

Throughout the history of education, the ideal has been maintained that each person will become the best person he or she can be and will enjoy the best life, an ideal that is realistic, achievable, and shared, in the words of Wolbert et al.

(2019). This idea of flourishing that serves as a horizon for education has two more references, one more elevated and undefined, and another more realistic and particular. The more elevated one is the “idealised” ideal of flourishing of the human being and of a flourishing life; it is the “more ideal” one because it displays characteristics that are not fulfilled completely by any person. Its “utility” in education is as encouragement to support continued growth; it serves as inspiration, despite being a utopian, ultimate ideal of unachievable perfection, in the words of Wolbert et al. (2019). The more concrete one is the flourishing people can achieve in their lives taking into account their individual conditions and potential (capacity, age, time of life, opportunities, health, social support, etc.) and their social and cultural setting.

The three levels of conceptualisation of flourishing are necessary to establish a theory of it as an objective of education, but an ideal that is realistic, objective, achievable, and common to all people is especially essential as is an ideal that is objective, realistic, and fitted to the opportunities and characteristics of the people to whom the educational help is directed. So for example, the concept of human flourishing theoretically fits early childhood so that it can serve as an objective for basic education at school and in the family (Wolbert et al., 2021).

Therefore, the concepts of flourishing that have the greatest impact in education, which we review in this section, have sufficient content to be put forward theo-

retically as an educational aim, even if it is necessary to establish more delineated objectives, adapted to the circumstances of the learners at a later stage. This said, in these conceptions of human flourishing, we miss the consideration of the moral and transcendent dimensions. As Carr (2021) notes, even when reference is made to moral excellences, such as the virtues, these are mainly understood at a psychological and functional level.

4. The role of character education in promoting flourishing

Education for flourishing involves helping to actualise the intrinsic orientation of human nature (Joseph et al., 2020); it contributes to the development of people’s internal capabilities (Mollvik, 2021). If we keep the concept of human flourishing as the actualisation of human potential so that each person leads a good life, character development is one of the facets of this realisation of the human being; furthermore, good character is the “heart” and “head” of human potential and of the process of actualising it.

Activity that is specifically human is characterised by being directed by reason, the guide that sets aims and seeks means. Human beings think about what they desire and they plan the continuum of activities all through their lives. Conceptions of flourishing as psychological well-being centre on the development of certain capacities such as competence, social relationality, and autonomy that are necessary for self-determination, in other words, the deployment of the rational direction of

human action that becomes meaningful to unfold the integrity (the consistency of being and doing) and the meaning of life (Ryan & Deci, 2017). This conception feeds many educational programmes that have human flourishing as their objective (Kristjánsson, 2020b).

Human flourishing does not set out or culminate, with any of the aims that are the goal of self-determination nor with any content with which the integrity and purpose of life is achieved (Besser, 2014; Naval, 2020). Ensuring that self-determination is directed towards a meaningful life requires a stable disposition towards an aim and for this aim to be appropriate, for which education in virtues that help to guide the morality of the purpose is important (Han, 2015). For this reason, people also need a moral character, capacities to know which purposes are good, which activities are good, what a good life is, beyond the good pertaining to an optimal psychological functioning (VanderWeele, 2022). This author identifies character with a moral or virtuous character insofar as it contributes to each individual's own well-being and to the well-being of others, an idea found in many cultures, traditions, and religions.

The influence of the ethics of virtues and of neo-Aristotelianism can be appreciated in the theories of character and of character education, which either only consider character as moral character or the moral aspect when highlighting the different dimensions of character (performance, ethical, intellectual, civic) that they regard as central for flourishing (Lickona

& Davidson, 2005; Arthur & Kristjánsson, 2022). As Berkowitz (2022) explains: the purpose of character education is to nourish the flourishing of human goodness, and morality is the most important aspect of character:

character comprises a series of characteristics that motivate and make it possible for one to act as a moral agent (moral character), do one's best work (performance character), collaborate effectively in shared spaces to promote the common good (civic character), and enquire effectively into knowledge and truth and pursue them (intellectual character). These domains are not isolated but overlap. (Berkowitz, 2022, pp. 53-54).

Most of the approaches that emphasise moral character underline one of its components: the virtues. The virtues are the good or excellent actualisation of human capacities, essential for human flourishing (Miller, 2017; Wolbert et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2021). The development of moral character is a constituent of human flourishing and is not just a means to achieve a good life; therefore, the virtues contribute to other aspects of flourishing at the same time as being an essential part of the flourishing that is achieved (VanderWeele, 2022).

Kristjánsson refers to the virtues only implicitly in proposing a conception of flourishing as objective well-being as an aim of education, as shown in the definition given in the previous section (2020a, p. 1). This lack of emphasis, which is striking if we take into account the importance this author places on the virtues in character

education (Arthur & Kristjánsson, 2022), is consistent with his thesis that education for flourishing is not the same as character education (Kristjánsson, 2020a, 2020b) and with the less important role he recognises for the virtues: “flourishing involves a broader objective than the cultivation of character (...). Specifically, full development of the human virtues is neither necessary nor sufficient for flourishing” (2020b, p. 24).

On this basis, it could be deduced that character education centred on the development of the virtues is neither sufficient nor necessary for human flourishing. We will examine the scope of these claims, starting in the next section with the thesis that character education is not sufficient for flourishing.

4.1. The sufficiency of character education for achieving flourishing

In a *eudaimonic* concept of human flourishing that includes the process of achieving a life that is happy, full, successful, and complete, having a good character is not sufficient to flourish. To flourish, people need, as well as a good character, goods that do not depend on their activity and the direction they give to their lives. On the contrary, the possibility and opportunity of their activity depends on these goods, among which education stands out. This idea, which was present in the Aristotelian philosophy of *eudaimonia*, is reiterated by numerous authors who describe human flourishing (White, 2011; Kristjánsson, 2020a). In this sense of flourishing, it is reasonable to maintain that character education, whether or

not it centres on education in virtues, is not sufficient to achieve flourishing. Furthermore, not even a complete education is enough for flourishing. If this prepares people to achieve a flourishing life, the educational process that learners undergo in the present cannot foresee everything they will need in their future lives (Carr, 2021; Wolbert et al., 2021).

Assuming that character education is not sufficient for flourishing leads us to ask whether it is also insufficient when directed at a central dimension of human flourishing, namely, when we consider the growth of human capacities and the unfolding of the activities that comprise a good and fulfilled life. Is character education sufficient as an educational focus centred on the promotion of the virtues? Kristjánsson answers no to this question and, at the same time, his pedagogical proposal for school education to expand the dimensions of students’ flourishing points at expanding character education itself.

He gives the impression that he combines two questions in his arguments about the sufficiency of character education for flourishing: one referring to the objective, which is flourishing itself, and the other relating to the suitability of certain methods. We could answer the first question — is promotion of virtues sufficient for this vision of flourishing as personal growth? — by noting that an integrative vision of the virtues that comprise character is lacking in character education models or programmes (Wright et al., 2021). Kristjánsson (2020a) proposes as capacities that should be developed in the school, virtuous emotions such

as wonder, awe, surprise, and the capacity to undertake self-transcendent activities. In other words, what is lacking is the introduction of concrete objectives in character education for flourishing, such as the development of virtues and virtuous emotions that are not contemplated in school education programmes.

Regarding the second question — are the methods of character education sufficient? — various criticisms and problems are presented in view of the pedagogical methods used in character education centred on the development of virtues, such as: the inefficacy of lessons and instruction about virtue; the uninteresting and unappealing activities with which the development of virtues is attempted; the loss of formative opportunities when not taking advantage of interpersonal relations in school, family, and other social spaces; and doubts about the effect of the good example in self-motivation to act well.

As an alternative, Kristjánsson (2020a) proposes introducing opportunities at school for experiences of epiphany and peak experiences that inspire emotions before great ideals and consequently drive the development of self-transcendent activities. We will now consider this topic to attempt to understand whether they are something that is juxtaposed with character education or they could be integrated into this educational focus seeking to promote the flourishing of people.

4.2. Experiences of epiphany, self-transcendence, and transformative education

The notion of flourishing in psychological and philosophical theory entails some

form of self-transcendence (Miller, 2017). Transcendence is overcoming, through activities and commitments in accordance with reason, the perspective of the self, which is centred in the satisfaction of one's own desires and appetites. Self-transcendence is the manifestation in human activity of the spiritual dimension of flourishing. Kristjánsson (2020a) emphasises this dimension of flourishing recalling the inspiration of Aristotle and Plato: human beings flourish to a greater degree when able to satisfy their inclination towards transcendence, towards the true, the beautiful, and the good.

His line of argument presents an education in which teachers inspire students' aspiration towards transcendent realities through experiences of epiphany in the school. These experiences change the students, they make them feel in a way that inspires them to take an interest in and value aspects of reality for which it is worth the trouble to do something meaningful in life. But what exactly are experiences of epiphany? Are experiences of epiphany transformative? Are they educational experiences? Do they contribute to character education?

The experience of epiphany awakens emotionally — feeling admiration, surprise, awe, joy, shock, horror, fear — the value that something everyday or extraordinary in life or the world acquires for a person. In a certain sense, this type of experience elevates and changes the person (Fuentes, 2021). In philosophy, these experiences of ecstasy relate to the transformation of people in various di-

mensions: moral, intellectual, aesthetic, religious (Kristjánsson, 2020a). Humanist psychology, particularly Maslow and Rogers, describes peak experiences as those where the richest emotions of the spirit are produced when encountering beauty (Mercado, 2022) and which we can understand as experiences of epiphany.

Yacek and Gary (2020) refer to the epiphany as a sort of transformative experience that is characterised by being disruptive in that it causes a change in everyday activity, and it is also constructive, as it awakens an aspiration to integrate the value that is uncovered or revealed into one's own life. Experiences of epiphany are transformative experiences. The transformative experience leads to epistemological and personal changes, the acquisition of something that was not previously possessed. These changes, which are the result of discovering something, occur in fields such as personal preferences, psychological attitudes, values, and beliefs. They are profound changes that are produced by the imprint an experience leaves, thus becoming a personal transformative experience (Paul & Quiggin, 2020). Drawing on experiences of this type in education is what characterises transformative education.

Transformative education is not a novel proposal. The idea of transforming human capacities has been a constant in the history of education in the West from Plato to Dewey (Yacek et al., 2020). What is innovative about transformative education is that it draws attention to how educational objectives and media are conceived.

The term transformative emphasises one objective of education, of teaching and learning, which Yacek (2021) describes as producing a profound and existentially meaningful change in relation to what we can be and do. Furthermore, the word transformative underlines an educational medium, the activities that provoke transformative experiences.

Not all of the educational focuses that are grouped under the category of transformative education follow the same objectives and methods, nor are they directed at the same groups of people as learners, but one thing they do have in common is that the intended personal changes have an impact on human flourishing and, more specifically, on personal capacities to act, in other words, on the character (Lee et al., 2021). Miller (2017) gives as an example, two types of transformative experiences to induce a personal moral transformation that includes the acquisition of virtues: adventure education and service learning. Another example is Yacek's (2021) project for educational centres, which basically entails creating an "aspirational" school classroom with the objective of boosting moral and intellectual growth through peak experiences or experiences of epiphany.

Consequently, it is reasonable to think that character education is a type of transformative education, given that its aim is to ensure people change in their capacities to the point of being able to steer their lives towards valuable achievements that have an effect on the development of the world and of others.

5. The need for character education to achieve flourishing

What leads Kristjánsson to assert that the development of virtues is not necessary to flourish? Kristjánsson (2015, 2020a), following Aristotelian ethics, sees character virtues as something intrinsic to the flourishing life; they form a good life and are not just something that leads to it. He does not note the fact that this idea is barely recognised in the theories of flourishing. The flourishing life is not at the end of life as a result or sum of successful days, but rather it emerges every day with valuable and good activities that contribute to improving the human being and at the same time his or her life in all of the improvable dimensions. That said, it should be concluded that education for the development of virtues is necessary for flourishing. Nonetheless, Kristjánsson does not perceive this need, and uses the expression full development of the virtues.

We believe that the concept of virtue that Kristjánsson upholds, interpreting Aristotelian ethics literally, leads to a rejection of the need to promote virtues to achieve flourishing because it is an inaccessible ideal of virtue. The ideal of virtues contains two impossible aspects of what full development (Kristjánsson, 2020a) entails: achieving the perfection of the virtue that is identified with the name of excellence (*areté*) and achieving the unity-integration of the virtues. The theory of the unity of the virtues describes how acquiring one virtue does not happen without acquiring all of the virtues at the same time, and so it claims, for example, that a person cannot be prudent without being moder-

ate or cannot be moderate, strong, and just without prudence. From this perspective, Kristjánsson, among other authors, does not believe that promotion of the virtues is necessary in order to flourish, but does conclude that people who have flourishing lives do not actually have a complete virtue. Instead they possess some virtues in particular areas or have simply acquired sufficient habit or skill to do an activity well (Miller, 2017; Curren, 2020; Kristjánsson, 2020a).

However, two replies to this argument occur to us. One starts from how these authors conceive flourishing as an objective of education. The other opens up the possibility of interpreting Aristotelian ethics differently. Wolbert et al. (2019) argue that aspiring to flourishing as an ideal objective does not exclude the possibility of striving to achieve particular goods that are thought to comprise flourishing, as though these goods were goals. This orientation is applicable to character education. The ideal of virtue as objective does not rule out doing virtuous activities and acquiring basic virtues, something that is a constituent of flourishing and leads to the fullest flourishing that can be achieved, the development of virtues.

In other words, Kristjánsson (2020b) argues that flourishing is conceived as an ideal objective, explaining that it is a threshold concept and so it is not necessary to achieve the highest possible degree of excellence to be considered as flourishing. Taking this idea further, it is reasonable to think of the ideal of virtue as an objective of education. The acquisition of

virtues should not be renounced because one does not expect to achieve the highest perfection in the possession of the virtue. In this sense, a broader hermeneutics of the Aristotelian theory of virtues is needed, such as the one developed by Pieper (2018). We underline three theses on the basis of which character education for flourishing can be understood as necessary and possible.

The virtues are stable dispositions and habits of human capacities to know, feel, desire, and act well. They are stable but not fixed. They can grow and can be lost, that is to say, they admit degrees of goodness in accordance with the mode of the human being.

We differentiate between virtues considering a variety of criteria. The principal criterion is to name the virtue according to the type of activity to which it predisposes. For example, we distinguish moral virtues from intellectual ones, or social ones from civic ones. The theory of the unity of the virtues is applied to the basic virtues — moderation, strength, prudence, and justice — which are acquired with different levels of perfection. So, a person with a sufficient degree of moderation can be strong and prudent or even, above all in this latter case, be more prudent than moderate.

Finally, in this section, we should reflect on the hierarchy that Aristotle (2009) identifies to arrange the goods that make up a flourishing life and to understand the realistic touch that it gives to comprehend a good and complete life, achiev-

able insofar as it depends on the liberty of people. On this point, we return to the ideas about human beings' inclination towards transcendent ideals. For Aristotle, human life as a contemplative activity is unachievable, and yet it drives us to seek justice and friendship in political life.

The virtues as goods are not the only goods of human flourishing, but they are important for individual flourishing, as they prepare people to overcome egotistical motivations and foster a civilised society in which citizens have a strong sense of justice and benevolence (Miller, 2017). Character education is necessary in order to achieve a flourishing life but it must be complemented with activities that present and move transcendent ideals, which include benevolent love.

Although for Kristjánsson (2020a), love is too ideal for the world, it is the ideal that all people should pursue because it is a necessary ingredient in a good human life. It is a complete but imperfect activity because it depends on people: it is intrinsically good, it can be pursued for itself, it can be actualised throughout one's life and it requires the basic virtues.

6. Conclusion

The conceptions of flourishing that theorists of education present serve to define them as an objective of character education. A greater level of specification of objectives and of the content of human flourishing demands a reflection that is adapted to the reality of the learners. In the *eudaimonic* sense, flourishing is a fulfilled life

made continuously all through one's life in response to a rational project based on personal and social conditions. Moral virtues are necessary because it is only from a stable impulse structure that the human being is in a position to choose and pursue the purpose of his or her life (Spaemann, 1991).

Character education is not in itself sufficient to achieve flourishing as an objective, as we have found in our analysis of the principal arguments that support this idea. The argument that character education and, in particular, the promotion of virtues are not necessary to stimulate human flourishing, presents some problems and contradictions. In our view, if there is an aspiration to people being able to steer their lives proposing and seeking a good life then the concepts of flourishing that we have studied and the belief that an educational impetus to develop virtues is not needed to achieve this growth both fail to recognise the central value of justice, friendship, and the love of benevolence.

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