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Flourishing as the aim of education:

Towards an extended, ‘enchanted’ Aristotelian account

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Flourishing, understood along Aristotelian or quasi-Aristotelian lines as objective *eudaimonic* well-being, is re-emerging as a paradigm for the ideal aim of education in the 21st century. This paper aims to venture beyond the current accounts and Aristotle’s own, by arguing that both suffer from a kind of ‘flatness’ or ‘disenchantedness’ in failing to pay heed to the satisfaction of certain impulses that have been proven to give fullness to our lives: impulses having to do with awe-inspiring emotional attachments to transpersonal ideals. I thus argue that while Aristotelian flourishing is a necessary place to begin, it is not a sufficient one to conclude, a study of human flourishing, either generally or in classroom contexts; it needs to be extended and ‘enchanted’ in order to do so. That venture does not necessitate an embrace of supernaturalism, however.

Keywords: *flourishing; Aristotle; education; enchantment; supernaturalism*

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I. Introduction

Flourishing (*eudaimonia*) has re-emerged as a popular ideal of the good human life in contemporary virtue ethics (Annas, 2011) and positive psychology (Seligman, 2011). At the same time, a number of prominent educational philosophers have developed theories of flourishing as the overarching aim of education (see e.g. Brighouse, 2006; White, 2011; de Ruyter, 2004). Brighouse states unequivocally that ‘the central purpose of education is to promote human flourishing’ (2006, p. 42); White wants schools, above anything else, to be ‘seedbeds of human flourishing’ (2011, p. 3); and de Ruyter focuses on the hopes of parents that ‘their children will lead a flourishing life’ (2004, p. 377). I have reviewed those theories in a separate article and argued that (a) they add considerable backbone to our understanding of what a paradigm of flourishing would mean in 21st century schools, (b) they draw extensively on Aristotle’s conception of flourishing, but would benefit from doing so more explicitly; and (c) they make heavy, if not necessarily unreasonable, demands on teachers as facilitators of flourishing (Kristjánsson, 2016).

Aristotle’s (1985) account of flourishing (hereafter: *AF*) has been shown to carry a number of advantages for educators, especially in its typical incarnation as ‘character education’ for those interested in the moral aspects of education, since *AF* assumes that it is impossible to achieve *eudaimonia* without being morally good – without actualising the moral virtues. So much has been written of late about character education *qua* education for flourishing (see e.g. Carr, 2012; Sanderse, 2012; Kristjánsson, 2015) that one more rehearsal will seem superfluous. It would be amiss to fail to mention here, however, two ways in which education for flourishing makes for a more expansive goal than mere character education, on standard understandings. First, character education is sometimes understood nowadays to

comprise the ‘résumé virtues’ only (Brooks, 2015): instrumental virtues such as resilience and grit. It is an Aristotelian truism that genuine character education will ascribe higher priority to the non-instrumental ‘eulogy virtues’ (Brooks, 2015), especially the moral ones (e.g. honesty and compassion), for if we block out the latter, we proceed to trivialise what is most distinctive about us as humans. Conversely, character education which focused solely on moral qualities – but not, say, also intellectual ones – would not suffice as education for flourishing. Second, education for flourishing goes well beyond what is typically meant by ‘character education’ as a form of ‘moral’ or ‘life-skills’ education’, be it taught in a discrete class or caught through the school ethos. Education for flourishing is meant to permeate all school activities and practices, including every subject taught, and even necessitate a redesign of the whole curriculum (White, 2011).

Notwithstanding my sympathies, expressed elsewhere (Kristjánsson, 2015; 2016), with *AF* in general and its latter-day counterparts in particular, the aim of the present article is to venture beyond the current accounts *and* Aristotle’s own, by arguing that both suffer from a kind of ‘flatness’ or ‘disenchantedness’ in failing to pay heed to the satisfaction of certain impulses that have been proven to give fullness to our lives: impulses having to do with emotional attachments to transpersonal ideals. I thus argue that while *AF* is a necessary place to begin, it is not a sufficient one to conclude, a study of human flourishing; it needs to be *extended* and *enchanted* in order to do so.

In what follows, I continue to use the acronym *AF* to refer to ordinary Aristotelian flourishing, as explicitly or implicitly grounded in his works, but *EAF* to refer to the sort of extended, enchanted flourishing that I consider a necessary amplification of the standard account. My hope is that these additional considerations will enter the bloodstream of

contemporary flourishing advocates and quicken its pulse. At the same time, I hope that what I have to say can provide the outlines of a new, expanded neo-Aristotelian account of flourishing.

Section II begins to pose searching questions about whether both *AF* and the current quasi-Aristotelian accounts fail to acknowledge certain core ingredients of the good life. Section III continues by probing whether acknowledging those extra ingredients in order to ‘enchant’ Aristotle forces us to abandon his naturalism and embrace supernaturalism – or more specifically theism. I answer that question ultimately in the negative. Section IV finally offers some concluding and summarising thoughts.

II. Are standard accounts of flourishing flat and disenchanted?

In *World light*, the 1937 *tour-de-force* Hardy-meets-Cervantes-meets-Dostoyevsky novel of the Icelandic Nobel laureate Halldór Laxness (2002), we encounter the protagonist (anti)-hero Ólafur Kárason and follow his chequered trajectory through life. Abandoned by his mother and living in squalor with an abusive foster family, Ólafur remains bedridden through much of his childhood, suffering from a condition that would probably be diagnosed nowadays as a mixture of post-traumatic stress disorder, vitamin deficiency and hypochondria. After being cured by a mystical figure (at a juncture where the writing style of the novel subtly moves from social realism into magic realism), Ólafur embarks on a Quixotic journey of continued physical and emotional torments, ruinous love affairs, a tortured marriage, several children, shady dealings with crooked capitalists, supernatural encounters of varied provenance and a descent into paedophilia (which destroys his ambitions as a teacher). Always the loser but never embittered or beaten, Ólafur strives to

achieve his childhood vision of becoming a great poet; yet he never succeeds in achieving anything close to greatness, partly because of adverse circumstances, partly because of lack of any noticeable talent.

In a life that only seems to offer recipes for disaster, Ólafur is sustained by one consolation: his quest for ‘the epiphanic resonance of the divine’, attained through glimpses, far and few between since childhood, and recurring flashbulb recollections of those glimpses, where he comes ‘face to face with the inexpressible’ and experiences ‘infinite chorus glory and radiance’. In those rare moments of exaltation, Ólafur’s whole sense of self dissolves into ‘one sacred, tearful yearning’ to be united with something higher than himself – transfigured by infinite truth and beauty. Symbolically, at the end of his life, he embarks on a final redemptive journey (at Easter) up to a glacier, the earthly representation of his vision of vastness and transcendence, where the mountain meets the sky and ‘becomes one with Heaven’. He disappears into the depths of the glacier, becoming one with it, in a place ‘where beauty reigns forever, beyond all demands’.

Ólafur Kárson’s life is almost as far away from that of a privileged *phronimos* (the person of full virtue in *AF*) as one can imagine. Deprived of moral luck and hampered by his own dearth of moral character and intellectual stamina, Ólafur’s life may, at first sight, seem to be best described as wretched rather than *eudaimon*. Yet there is something *exquisite* about its wretchedness. The hope of ‘the epiphanic resonance of the divine’ gives it meaning and unwavering purpose. Some readers see *World light* as a simple reminder of how a creative spirit can survive in even the most crushing environment and the most uncompromising human vessel. But there is, I submit, more to it than that. Imagine Ólafur as having been brought up by good people under fortunate life circumstances, yet retaining his ecstatic,

enchanted encounters with the ideals of oneness and beauty, and you have a life that somehow seems to surpass that of the *phronimos*. Despite its abysmal failings, Ólafur's life appears to retain something of the putative attainments of the human *ergon* (natural function) that Aristotle misses. If that is the case, philosophers developing an Aristotelian vision of human flourishing need to take notice. The same goes for the current accounts of educational flourishing, to the extent that they share Aristotle's tendencies to foreground the mundane over the exalted.

In his 1864 book on Aristotle, English literary critic and philosopher George Henry Lewes describes him as 'utterly destitute of any sense of the Ineffable'. 'There is no quality in him more noticeable', Lewes observes, 'than his unhesitating confidence in the adequacy of the human mind to comprehend the universe', and this 'unhesitating mind' is utterly 'destitute of awe' (Lewes, 1991). Such grievances have not only been expressed by foes of Aristotle but also his friends. Thus, Aristotelian philosopher Broadie complains 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' (1991, p. 36), without awareness of which any account of human nature becomes deflated and incomplete. What many commentators consider one of the main attractions of *AF* as the aim of education and of life in general, namely its distinctive worldliness and its 'affirmation of ordinary life' (Taylor, 2007, p. 370), may easily degenerate into a philistine fetishisation of the mundane, possibly accompanied by a sense of 'emptiness, or non-resonance' (Taylor, 2007, p. 308). I see eerie signs of that in some neo-Aristotelian accounts of late, and I do not exclude my own (2007; 2015) books there.

Some of the most vocal criticisms of ‘flatness’ (or lack of ‘fullness’) in *AF* have come lately from religious (esp. Catholic) thinkers, such as Charles Taylor (2007), who connects the charge of flatness with his critique of a ‘disenchanted’, excessively narrow, naturalistic view. In the present section, I focus on the charge of an excessive or misbegotten naturalism underlying *AF*, without invoking a supernaturalistic alternative, but I address the latter in Section III. As a matter of fact, Taylor himself does not so much attack Aristotle as a philistine Enlightenment stance that other theorists will trace back to Aristotle’s earthbound rejection of Plato’s idealism. Taylor objects to three components of disenchantment: scientism, mechanism and instrumentalism (2007, p. 773). Disenchantment is, for him, not only an abstract, theoretical peril: it is a practical evil that makes human lives humdrum and mediocre, consumed by the daily grind (cf. Dunne, 2010, p. 62). Underneath our daily travails, however, there will for most of us be moments of depth, joy and fullness which give us a clue that somewhere, ‘in some activity, or condition’, there ‘lies a fullness, a richness’ where life is ‘more worthwhile, more admirable, more what it should be’ (Taylor, 2007, p. 5). In default of this fullness – even for people who seem to be flourishing according to objective criteria – there looms a sense of ‘terrible flatness in the everyday’, an experience particularly rife in consumer society (2007, p. 309).

In the background of those criticisms lurk some well-known themes from Taylor’s general moral philosophy, such as his notion of ‘strong evaluations’ of things we ought to value, by comparison to which typical neo-Aristotelian functional evaluations of the good of human beings, as analogous to that of plants and animals, will seem ‘weak’ and insipid (MacPherson, 2012). The reason is that the functional explanations (drawing on Aristotle’s insight that we should think biologically about how living beings thrive) arguably fail to

make sense of our moral phenomenology, for instance of how we pass second-order moral judgements about our own first-order moral judgements (MacPherson, 2015).

It may well be that Aristotle has missed something fundamental about the human *ergon*. Latter-day theorists have identified those missing parts in human beings' deep-seated orientation or urge – sometimes referred to as 'a transcendent urge' (Cottingham, 2012) – towards extraordinary, idealised experiences of the true, good and beautiful (see e.g. Flanagan, 2007, p. 187). This urge is revealed, *inter alia*, in the inter-human aesthetic impulse (Dissanayake, 1992) and a strong drive towards some sort of spirituality (Hardy, 1966). One could even argue that the desire for getting high on drugs – especially psychedelic drugs – has the same psychological (or biological) provenance. Sensuous affinity for the landscapes and life-forms of the world, as well as their representation in art, and awe before the immensity of the universe are examples of the sought-after experiences (Hay & Nye, 2006, p. 141). Incorporating these considerations into his (naturalistic) account, Flanagan describes the good life in terms of a complex 'psycho-poetic performance' (2007, pp. 16, 187). In contrast, despite his profound interest in the moral value of poetry, Aristotle did not see art as satisfying a transcendent urge.

Accusing Aristotle himself of flatness may seem blatantly unfair at first sight. Even Taylor wants to exonerate him – as opposed to his naturalistic successors – from blame because of 'the important role for contemplation of a larger order as something divine in us' (2007, p. 27). Contemplation (*theoria*) is a touchy topic for many Aristotelian scholars, and they are not sure what to make of it. It clearly involves some profound reflections on the *telos* of human life and also on the unchanging truths of mathematics, metaphysics, physics and divinity. It is even accompanied by a characteristic pleasure, like the successful display of all

virtues. However, notice that Aristotle's deistic God (who does not interfere in the workings of the universe) is a pure thinker, and the pleasure referred to is not active and ecstatic but rather an un-self-conscious pleasure in unimpeded activities. Contemplation thus lacks the aesthetic dimension that one would find, for example, in Confucianism and its reverence of 'Heaven' and 'the Way' – although Confucianism is often taken to be even more mundane than Aristotelianism (Sim, 2007, pp. 2–3).

Carr (2014) may well be right that we read Aristotle too much through a modern scientific lens and underestimate the extent to which the objects of his inquiry were esoteric, on a modern understanding (for example, rational purposes endowed with causal powers). That granted, the virtue of contemplation scarcely saves *AF* from an accusation of flatness. Griffin, for instance, is scathing in his dismissal of this detached 'God-like review of eternal truths as they march in orderly formulation before the mind'. He concludes that this 'passive, narrow, austere, even rather boring activity would not go far towards making life valuable or giving it substance' (1986, pp. 57–58).

The root of the problem may lie in Aristotle's theory of the emotions. Aristotle famously gives a prominent role to emotions in the actualisation of *eudaimonia* (Kristjánsson, 2007). When one looks at the emotions that Aristotle describes in his *Rhetoric* (2007), however, these 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 or nature, the immensity of the universe or the goodness of an act of self-sacrifice. Knuuttila makes this point bluntly when

he says that ‘Aristotle was not inclined to seek the meaning and end of life outside it, as Plato did, and correspondingly he did not think that detachment from appreciating contingent things and from associated emotions is what philosophy should teach people’ (2004, p. 25); hence the lack of attention paid to any kind of transcendence.

‘Transcendence’ is a tricky word, however. When it is claimed that the goods at issue in *eudaimonic* activity are self-transcendent goods (or goods ‘larger’ than the self), that is a leaf taken straight out of Aristotle’s book, as indeed out of any respectable non-egoistic moral theory. For example compassion (Gr. *eleos*) transcends the self in being directed at the undeserved misfortune of another person. So what seems to be missing from *AF* is not *self*-transcendence as such (*qua* ‘horizontal transcendence’ *vis-à-vis* other people) but rather *selves*-transcendence (*qua* ‘vertical transcendence’ towards ideals), or more specifically the notion of *transpersonal* emotions with their heightened, ecstatic sensitivities. While Flanagan is right that it is odd to characterise transcendence as a separate virtue, as positive psychologists do, because it lacks the required specificity of a characteristic domain (2007, chap. 2), the transpersonal urge is, I submit, a universal human orientation to exalted ideals. I would hesitate to describe a human life as flourishing that did not include considerable elements of emotional awe. Children’s experiences of the world are typically filled with awe, but unfortunately the capacity for awe often seems to dissipate in adolescence and become suppressed in many adults, leading to the sort of ‘flatness’, ‘insipidity’ and ‘disenchantedness’ that Taylor decries.

I therefore make the daring theoretical move of proposing that to make sense of human flourishing in its full, *AF* be expanded to *EAF*: extended, enchanted flourishing. Taylor himself is more demanding than I am about the extra elements needed to amplify flourishing

(as we see in the following section), beyond those of transpersonal emotions. He even suggests in some places (although he is not consistent on this) that what he calls ‘fullness’ goes *beyond* or is *independent of* human flourishing (2007, pp. 16–19; yet on p. 44 he only talks about fullness going beyond ‘ordinary’ human flourishing). I remain adamant in assuming, however, that *EAF* refers to a notion of *ordinary human flourishing*, although it exceeds Aristotle’s account. We simply know more about human psychology than he did in his time, and it is fully in line with Aristotelian naturalism to update it when needed in light of new evidence – empirical, normative or both. As Iris Murdoch once dramatically put it, if a moral philosophy does not give a satisfactory or sufficiently rich account of the good, ‘then away with it’ (1988, p. 215). I am suggesting something a bit less dramatic: an Aristotelian revision.

If what is missing in Aristotle is the orientation towards the proverbial Platonic triad of the good, the true and the beautiful – someone might ask – then why not simply recoil from *AF* altogether and embrace Plato’s ideas of flourishing? That might seem quite a dramatic move – replacing the proverbial clod chopper with the proverbial cloud hopper, as vividly represented in Raphael’s *School of Athens*; yet Flanagan suggests as much with his claim that in order to flourish, a person must penetrate the Platonic spaces of the good, true and beautiful to some degree (2007, p. 40). Rather than dwelling with Aristotle inside Plato’s cave, should we not follow Plato’s lead and try to get a glimpse of the sunlight outside? As Diotima asks in her famous speech, cited by Socrates in the *Symposium*, ‘what if man had eyes to see the true beauty – the divine beauty, I mean, pure and dear and unalloyed, not clogged with [...] all the colours and vanities of human life [...] Would that be an ignoble life? (Plato, 2015, 211e–212a). No – the obvious answer is – that would not be an ignoble

life. Moreover, Platonism offers some merits above and beyond Aristotle, for instance in making sense of epiphanic moral conversion, in people brought up in bad habits, as a result of sudden dramatic exposure to transpersonal ideals (see e.g. Jonas, 2015).

Nevertheless, I would argue that Aristotle's theory of flourishing and moral development offers resources – not least educational resources – that would be lost if we simply abandoned it wholesale and reverted to a Platonic account. It is no coincidence that most contemporary accounts of flourishing as the aim of education take their cue from Aristotle rather than Plato. Platonism comes with a heavy baggage that will put most current educators off: the metaphysical queerness of Plato's theory of forms, the hard rationalism and the radical motivational internalism (of people who know the good automatically doing the good), his political totalitarianism, his disregard for moral luck, his theory of justice as the primary virtue, and so forth. By drawing on Plato, educators will quickly find themselves biting off more than they can chew. All that said, however, a *complete* rejection of Plato's idealism – especially his general insight into people's orientation to transpersonal ideals – easily degenerates into a failure to take the bold, imaginative steps that Plato was able to take. I agree with educational philosopher Sanderse (2012) that we need a bit of Plato to complement Aristotle, although not necessarily in the places that Sanderse himself identifies (see Kristjánsson, 2015, chap. 6).

A theorist noticing the very lacuna in Aristotle that needs to be ameliorated was the humanist psychologist Maslow, whose theory of the pyramid of needs has now largely fallen into oblivion. Sharing and arguably drawing explicitly on many aspects of *AF* (see Ivie, 1986), Maslow believed that in order to fully actualise their potential, human beings needed to activate their Dionysian side as well as their Apollonian one. The very top of his pyramid

thus includes ecstatic ‘peak experiences’ (Maslow, 1964): experiences simultaneously, in Maslow’s view, ‘spiritual’, ‘cosmic’ *and* explicable within a naturalistic framework. It is perhaps a pity that current positive psychologists have so little time for their humanist predecessors, as they could probably learn a lot from Maslow on people’s need-based orientation towards transcendent ideals.

What do current theorists of flourishing of a practical bent have to say about the transpersonal urge and its role in the good life? Generally very little. Positive psychologists (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) posit ‘transcendence’ as an umbrella virtue for five different character strengths: gratitude, humour, appreciation of beauty and excellence, hope and spirituality/religiousness. However, it is difficult to specify precisely what these strengths have in common. The last three could perhaps be seen to be united by a transpersonal orientation, but the first two appear as gatecrashers in that party unless one understands gratitude and humour in unusual ‘cosmic’ senses. Brighthouse and de Ruyter do not really address the issue in question; White does, however, in detail, but only apparently to dismiss the sort of extension of the flourishing concept that I have been proposing in this section.

White devotes a whole chapter in his book (2011, chap. 12) to demonstrating that all the ‘depth’ we need in order to live well can be achieved within a mundane view of flourishing. Revelling, so to speak, in disenchantment, his main foils are anything spiritual and other-worldly. While acknowledging that he was drawn, as a young man, to texts about the mysteriousness of the universe, he describes how he later came to his senses and realised that all there is to know and enjoy in the world can be attained without engaging anything that could be called ‘spirituality’ (2011, p. 98). White treads a very thin line between accepting, as he does, the existence of more profound forms of fulfilment than playing pushpin, for

example in experiences involving nature and the arts, on the one hand, and on the other, rejecting any element of mystique in those experiences. What is anathema to him is basically religion – and I will mention that point again in Section III. At the present juncture, I would suggest that White throws the baby out with the bathwater. Not to see anything irreducibly awe-inspiring in the workings of the universe – the singularity of a black hole; the possibility of endless parallel worlds – involves, in my view, a concession to philistinism (although White himself is clearly anything but a philistine). White seems to think that going beyond mundane language in describing transpersonal experiences of what Ólafur Kárason called ‘ephiphanic resonance’ is tantamount to embracing a religious framework, ‘under God’s shadow’ (2011, p. 108), but as becomes apparent later, that may not be the case at all.

Understandably, White is deeply sceptical of anything that could be called ‘spiritual education’. He is not the only one. The mentioning of that term conjures up an image of an unhelpful label in education that has come to mean everything and nothing (Carr, 1995) and is probably beyond redemption. Yet if we acknowledge the main insight of *EAF*, as proposed in this section, schools need to create spaces in which children can find an outlet for the sensibilities that throb in their nerves towards ‘peak experiences’. White suggests that time should be carved out of the school day to enable students to pursue their particular passions (2011, p. 104). I would go much further and suggest, explicitly, that 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 *ergon*, 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 (cf. Hay & Nye, 2006, p. 149).

A good place to start is with Damon's research into the way in which seeing themselves as part of a grand scheme of things helps young people find their self-identity and a path to purpose (2008, p. 91). That said, I would hesitate to describe any laudable efforts by teachers to help children understand and actualise conceptions of *EAF* as efforts to help them in their quest for 'ultimate meaning' (*pace* Schinkel, 2015). First of all, 'ultimate meaning' is, as Schinkel acknowledges, a tricky term. Second, I think the 'meaning' that matters in school contexts refers to a much less demanding, and more easily realisable, ideal (Kristjánsson, 2016). The additional efforts that Schinkel and I have in mind, to steer children towards engagement with 'transpersonal ideals' or 'ultimate meaning', may not differ much in terms of actual classroom practice, but it does matter, from the point of view of philosophical justification, how we choose to conceptualise them.

In this section, I have used a plethora of different terms to try to capture the essence of Ólafur Káráson's quest for 'the epiphanic resonance of the divine': transpersonal urge, transcendental orientation, etc. Whatever we want to call it, this impulse is real and needs to be accommodated in philosophical and educational accounts of flourishing.

III. Do we need supernaturalism to make sense of enchanted flourishing?

It must be admitted that most of the theorists (apart from Flanagan, 2007) who have suggested an extended view of flourishing along the lines proposed above, in order to incorporate transcendental – or to use the less ambiguous term *transpersonal* – experiences,

have done so from within a religious framework. Hence, the question beckons whether or not *EAF* requires supernaturalism to replace Aristotle's avowed naturalism: a major change of compass indeed. In order to get a grip on that question, it helps to acknowledge that 'supernaturalism' and 'naturalism' are protean and treacherous terms, always trying to consume one another. In the light of modern physics, it could even be claimed that the distinction between them is out of its depth. Metz (2013, p. 79) defines 'supernaturalism' as assuming a relationship with a 'spiritual realm', but he admits that this does not answer the question of what counts as 'spiritual'. He ends up with the characterisation of 'spiritual' as 'outside of space and time' and 'not composed of sub-atomic particles'. However, some respectable physicists have conjectured that core concepts of standard physics, such as those of space of time, may not exist inside the singularity of black holes, and no one knows what particles, if any, dark matter is composed of.

To be honest, the question of whether a full account of flourishing needs supernaturalism is typically but a euphemism for the question whether it needs religion (witness the deep suspicion of the anti-religious White to even the slightest concessions in this area). Not every religion will presumably count here, though, for the atheist Flanagan (2007) makes a valiant effort to show that Buddhism would, for example, be fully compatible with a naturalist (e.g. Aristotelian) framework. One could easily imagine a similar argument being made in the case of a 'religion' such as, say, Emersonian unitarianism. So what we end up with is the question that people like Charles Taylor (2007, p. 8) are really interested in: Does flourishing need *theism*, say of the Catholic kind? To capture its true essence, does it need to be 'directed towards God's infinity' and to engage with sacredness and holiness rather than ordinary human happiness?

I can envisage three sorts of answers to the specific question, relevant for present purposes, of whether *EAF* requires theism: (1) Theism is required to make full sense of transpersonal experiences; (2) theistic religions offers valuable sources of insight (cultural, historical, symbolic, psychological) into such experiences, irrespective of its truth; (3) theism is either superfluous or positively misleading in trying to make sense of those experiences. The second answer is my own view. While that answer might seem insipid to some – or even a case of wanting to have one’s cake and eat it – it does carry significant educational ramifications. It would mean, for example, that to secure the required literacy of potential sources of transpersonal experiences, students in the Western world need to be exposed systematically at school to the heritage of the theistic religions, be it within a class designed as ‘religious education’ or somewhere else (cf. de Ruyter & Merry, 2009). How could a student, for example, understand the contours of the term ‘Damascus experience’, for sudden moral conversions in the wake of dramatic transpersonal experiences, without knowing what happened to a certain person on the way to Damascus? I say a little bit more about the educational implications at the end of this section, but let us start here by diving in at the deep end, with Taylor’s argument for (1).

Taylor traces the history of ‘flatness’ in accounts of human flourishing not back to Aristotle, for whom he has deep respect, but to the Enlightenment which turned the ‘perpetual absence of fullness’ so to speak into a virtue, thus warranting the Weberian notion of ‘disenchantment’ as an apt description of the modern predicament. One of the major changes wrought by disenchantment was the replacement of a conception of a ‘porous self’ (engaging with spirits and a God) with a ‘bounded’ (‘buffered’ and self-enclosed) one. This marked the beginning of the ‘me-culture’, at the individual level, and an acceptance at the

species level that there is no goal higher than human flourishing in a deflated sense (nowadays often described as *AF*, although Taylor refuses to do so.) This change excluded various ‘excess’ experiences from reckoning, captured nowadays by the label ‘awe’, characterised by a sense of boundlessness of natural phenomena or goodness. In short, the wilderness of the repertoire of the porous self was tamed by a regime of self-containment. Through this clampdown, the desire for a more-than-immanent transformative perspective – the *désir d'éternité* – was blanked out and even pathologised. But this is precisely, in Taylor’s view, why people who attain ordinary human flourishing (or what I have called *AF*) may find it to have a hollow ring: a feel of unease and a dispirited sense of purposelessness in a universe perceived as fully contingent (Taylor, 2007, pp. 10, 25, 38, 151, 335, 530, 621).

Taylor acknowledges the possibility of what I called option (2) above, namely of drawing lessons from idea of the ‘porous self’ but without accepting its necessarily religious grounding. He calls this strategy ‘responding to transcendent reality but misrecognizing it’ (2007, p. 768). He thinks that to attain complete and unalloyed fullness of flourishing, we must open ourselves up to the ultimate source of transcendence, which for him is the God of Abraham (2007, p. 769). To put this into the present context, Taylor would consider my account of *EAF* fully adequate only if it embraced theism. One cannot, so to speak, buy the foreground without the background: the true source of intelligibility. The sort of naturalist form of transcendence that I have proposed will be seen as a poor substitute for genuine non-naturalist transcendence (2007, pp. 676–678), although it may provide a temporary ‘exile’ (2007, pp. 6–7); for it makes Ólafur Kárason’s fleeting experiences of ‘the epiphanic resonance of the divine’ seem contrived and fake to him, even at the very moment of

experiencing them. To liberate ourselves from the shackles of ‘flat flourishing’, Taylor will argue, half-way measures do not suffice.

MacPherson, who is even more Taylorite than Taylor himself, has developed some of Taylor’s theses further in a series of well-turned articles (see e.g. 2012; 2015). He sees an inextricable link between Taylor’s historical analysis and his theory of ‘strong evaluations’. What is wrong with naturalism as a handle on flourishing is that it tries to understand the first-personal or phenomenological moral standpoint in terms of a third-personal one, subject to criteria of natural scientificity (MacPherson, 2012, p. 627), hence ruling out the possibility of evaluations of the ‘strong’ kind. Taylor, as MacPherson sees it, has articulated and defended a moral ontology that (alone) can inform and make sense of our moral phenomenology. He also draws an interesting link between Taylor’s views and those espoused in Nagel’s recent work on *Mind and cosmos* (2012) which also argues for a teleological understanding of the universe, albeit more along standard Aristotelian lines than those inspired by theism (MacPherson, 2015).

Another prominent writer who has argued forcefully that a full conception of flourishing requires a theistic commitment is John Cottingham (2012). Cottingham’s starting point – very much like Ólafur Káráson’s one – is human beings’ sporadic glimpses of the transcendent, however transitory and ephemeral. Some of those may, however, gradually solidify and become so strong that the so-called naturalistic world is irradiated. We sense a deeper meaning of values such as love, mercy and compassion, ultimately irreducible to any naturalistic account. We finally respond by yielding to a necessary impulse of trust – trust in a divine being who alone can make those experiences intelligible and provide a safe home

for our transcendent urges. To suppose that this deeper meaning can be sustained otherwise, is simply to give in to bad faith.

To turn now to the opposite view (3), of a full concept of human flourishing not requiring, or even being radically led astray by, a theistic outlook, the theistic option has suffered dismemberment at the hands of no less prominent a philosopher than Nussbaum (2002). She bites the bullet by arguing not only that a theistic dimension to flourishing is redundant for the concept to retain its salience and urgency, but that the concept is actually unintelligible outside of a context of human finitude. Hence, the very idea of eternal life, assumed by the major theistic religions, would make human flourishing implode, rather than expanding its resources. Human flourishing is flourishing for human beings as we know them; transcendent flourishing is for transcendent beings if those exist. Or as the Greeks put it: ‘Mortals should think mortal thoughts’ (2002, p. 451). Elsewhere, however, Nussbaum has acknowledged that there might be scope for a transcendence of an internal and human sort to extend the repertoire of ordinary humanness; and Taylor takes this to indicate that she is not fully consistent in her antipathy towards transcendent aspirations (2007, pp. 625–627).

A more sustained argument against any supernaturalistic interpretation of flourishing has been mounted by Flanagan (2007; 2009) – a theorist who, as we saw in the preceding section, spearheads the campaign to add Platonic aspirations (towards transpersonal ideals) to *AF*. This crusade against supernaturalism may seem odd at first sight, as Flanagan also offers a spirited defence of Buddhist ideals. However, he does think that Buddhism is amenable to a fully naturalistic interpretation, whereas the theistic religions are obviously not. Flanagan’s explicit aim is to decouple our ‘transcendent urge’ from any religious urge to posit divine beings (2009, p. 45). There is simply no space for such beings in any of the best accounts

science offers of the way the universe works, and going against science ‘in ways that incorporate superstitions and wishful thinking is childish and unbecoming to rational social animals such as us’ (2007, p. 108). ‘We are animals’, and this world ‘is a material one’, with no justification whatsoever for believing in divinities or an afterlife (2007, p. 126). This does not prevent Flanagan himself, he submits, from experiencing, to the full, emotions of awe and solemnity, evoking in him ‘a sense of the holy, sacred and precious’ (2007, p. 188), because all those phenomena may be given a perfectly reasonable naturalistic warrant. The universe can be truly a holy place for a materialist, at least a Buddhist materialist like Flanagan, with spirituality accommodated but ‘naturalized’ (2007, p. 291).

However persuasive one may (or may not) find Flanagan’s arguments, there is a strange mismatch between his extremely (some would say excessively) broad-minded, ecumenical stance towards different traditions of learning and world views, and the hard line he takes against any insights from the theistic religions. In a response paper, he acknowledges that some readers may find ‘a certain arrogance and/or condescension’ in the way he speaks down to believers. However, rather than making any concessions in order to soften his stance, he piles on the agony for the believers by claiming that when religious scientists say something about *theos*, they ‘invariably speak gibberish’ and sell ‘snake oil’ (2009, pp. 46–48). In the view of the present author, a much more reasonable approach to take is that of option (2), introduced earlier in this section: to accept that theism offers valuable sources of insight (cultural, historical and psychological) into transpersonal emotions and the motivations they engender. I would go as far as saying that the obvious place to start, in Western schools at least, for a teacher who wanted to introduce his students to insights into the ‘selves-transcending’, is with the great classic works of Western art, most of which have been

inspired by theistic beliefs. Even if Flanagan is right in that everything that can be said about the transcendent can, in principle, be said through a naturalistic script, it simply has not, in fact, been expressed as elegantly or profoundly through that medium as it has through religiously inspired art. Hence, there is a need for some sort of (non-confessional) religious education in schools, if only in order to illuminate what a great portion of humanity understands as the putative content of a paradigm like *EAF*.

I pronounced ‘spiritual education’ dead in the previous section. I may have been premature there. By invoking a parsimonious definition of spirituality as ‘awareness that there is something Other, something greater than the course of everyday events’ (Hay & Nye, 2006, p. 60), ‘spiritual education’ would seem to fill admirably the role that I envisage for religion as a guide to transpersonal experiences. I agree with Hay and Nye that a teacher of spirituality should help children become ‘aware of their awareness’ (2006, p. 143) of transcendent ideals and help them plot a path towards enriching that awareness. I have residual doubts, however, about this being best done under the rubric of anything called ‘spiritual education’. Instead, I consider this mission to fall squarely within the remit of any good moral or character education – at least for those who take seriously the proposal that *AF* be potentially extended to *EAF*.

White continues to sound warning signals about taking children down this road. He worries that, given children’s penchant for the supernatural and otherworldly, feeding them religious material on transcendence will simply nourish that urge and lead them further away from finding this-worldly answers to life’s greatest questions. They should be introduced to ‘wonder’ but not to ‘awe’ proper, as the latter has indelible religious connotations. Most importantly, as we in the West are living in an increasingly secular world, teachers should

respond to the needs of secular children for a secular world view; intimations of a supernaturalistic understanding of the urge for transpersonal ideals will hinder rather than help in that quest (White, 2014). Notably, Egan (2014) makes a distinction between wonder and awe, like White (with wonder focusing on the rationally graspable, but awe on the mysteries of existence), but he argues that it is the role of teachers to stimulate both emotions in students, and that they should do so by introducing each new topic with a focus on its exotic and unfamiliar aspects. John Haldane makes the same point, more generally, when he says that unless philosophers can show such an enterprise to be confused or exclusively religious, shying away from the deepest experiences of the human condition opens us up to the charge of ‘neglecting something of fundamental, indeed perhaps of ultimate human importance’ (2000, p. 64).

It is difficult to know in the end if White would be a committed objector to *EAF* – or to the potential role of schools in cultivating flourishing of that kind. He does acknowledge in a few places that there is a sense of mystery at work in our lives, albeit not of a ‘spooky’ kind which seeks answers in a ‘transcendent world’ (2011, p. 100). I have tried to show in this section and the last that there is a way of understanding transcendence (as selves-transcendence) which is not reliant on a religious world view. White may or may not agree with that manoeuvre. However, I am clearly more sympathetic than he is to the idea that insights from the mainstream theistic religions can enrich our understanding of transpersonal ideals (cf. also de Ruyter, 2006) – and help students find their own ways of satisfying their transcendent urges.

IV. Concluding remarks

I have argued in this article for an extension of standard accounts of flourishing, Aristotelian and modern, to incorporate the human urge for ideals that go beyond persons or ‘selves’ – namely, an urge for transpersonal or selves-transcending ideals – and human emotions targeting those ideals. For a number of (arguably mistaken) reasons, Aristotle did not count this urge as part of the human *ergon* and, hence, did not include it in his conception of human flourishing. Neither do the contemporary accounts.

Sections II and III both elaborated upon the possibility of an ‘enchanted’ version of *AF*, termed *EAF*; with Section II explaining the need for such an expansion of the account, while Section III explored the question of the possible or necessary contribution of theism to *EAF*. My conclusion was that while theism is not necessary to make sense of *EAF*, we would be unwise to ignore its insights – cultural and symbolic as well as substantive. For example, trying to understand the Western quest for transcendence without engaging with the theistic religions would be as limiting as trying to understand ancient Greek culture without reading Homer.

I hope that the tenor of my discussion will find resonance with both fellow-travellers on, and objectors to, the current flourishing bandwagon. Despite the growing interest in flourishing as an educational ideal – and in character education as the practical application of part of that ideal – I notice some deep and lingering dissatisfaction with this ideal among many educators, albeit dissatisfaction that is often not conceptualised adequately. I have suggested in this article what this dissatisfaction may actually be with, namely *disenchantment*, and how that shortcoming may be alleviated through an extended, enchanted Aristotelian account.

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