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# RECENT WORK ON FLOURISHING AS THE AIM OF EDUCATION: A CRITICAL REVIEW

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*ABSTRACT: Flourishing, understood along semi-Aristotelian lines, has re-emerged recently as an account of the ideal aim of education, for instance in works by educational philosophers Brighouse, White and de Ruyter. This article aims at critically reviewing this new paradigm, by subjecting it to philosophical and educational scrutiny. Throughout I compare and contrast this paradigm with Aristotelian flourishing, and explore the specific role of teachers as facilitators of students' flourishing and sense of meaning.*

*Keywords: flourishing, Aristotle, education, basic necessities, meaning*

## 1. INTRODUCTION: THE NEW FLOURISHING PARADIGM

Alongside the recent surge of Aristotle-inspired virtue ethics in moral philosophy (see e.g. Annas, 2011) and the rise of positive psychology as a psycho-moral and educational paradigm, drawing ever more closely on Aristotelian insights (see e.g. Seligman, 2011), *flourishing* (*eudaimonia*) has re-emerged as a popular ideal of the good human life. 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; 2015). 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), with those hopes being directed both at the present, namely that the children are flourishing here and now, and the future, namely that their overall lives, as adults, can be considered flourishing ones (2015, p. 85). A recent special issue of the *Journal of Moral Education* was devoted to flourishing as an educational concept (edited by Narvaez, 2015).

While the three educational philosophers cited above all seem to share Aristotle’s presupposition that it is ‘a universal feature of mankind that human beings want to live a flourishing life’ (de Ruyter, 2015, p. 93), none of them pledges allegiance to Aristotle. This omission may indicate that they want their theories to remain minimally reliant – substantively and justificatorily – on Aristotle’s historic paradigm, perhaps for fear of being tainted by association with some of the famously anti-liberal features of Aristotle’s account. That said, the essential nativity of all these educational flourishing theories is largely Aristotelian; they are heavily freighted with concepts and arguments harking back to the

ancient Greek philosopher. Indeed, there is precious little to choose here between these sporadic or reluctant ‘Aristotelians’ and another group of thinkers who take themselves to be developing a reconstructed form of neo-Aristotelian *eudaimonism* for educational purposes (Sanderse, 2012; Curren, 2010; 2013; Kristjánsson, 2007; 2015). For although the latter are more beholden to Aristotle’s conceptual repertoire, they have also deemed it necessary to revise Aristotle substantially in order to bring him into line with modern sensitivities and the practical demands of 21<sup>st</sup> century classrooms. In the case of both these groups, then, it is fair to say that ancient ideas about the good life have become enlivened with unsuspected contemporary significances.

To prevent initial misunderstandings, two quick observations are in order about the new paradigm of flourishing in education. First, it must not be confounded with an earlier well-being paradigm, at the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of the emotionally vulnerable child, which essentially psychologised, therapeutised and instrumentalised student well-being through initiatives such as the self-esteem and emotional-intelligence movements (see a trenchant critique in Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009; cf. Thorburn, 2015). In contrast, the flourishing paradigm takes a *strength-based* approach to student well-being; it is all about furthering assets that students already possess in nascent forms and helping them continue to develop the character qualities that are intrinsically related to (i.e. constitutive of) *eudaimonia* (Walker, Roberts and Kristjánsson, 2015). This fact should allay the fears of traditionalists that the flourishing paradigm is just one more attempt to smuggle a Trojan horse of touchy-feeliness into the classroom in order to undermine standard subjects and processes. That said, while the flourishing paradigm is conceptually distinct from the earlier deficit paradigm, the way this work is taken up by educational policy-makers, subsumed within particular

educational policy discourses, and translated into educational practice, may not necessarily be as distinct from the earlier incarnations of the emphasis on children's well-being. A second, but related, observation is that although the flourishing paradigm is sometimes connected to, or even equated with, a focus on the 'whole child' – a focus motivated by discontent with the current school system's one-sided emphasis on grade attainment (see e.g. Wolbert, de Ruyter and Schinkel, 2015) – education for flourishing is supposed to include traditional subject knowledge and other practical benefits of a well-rounded education. It is not meant to supplant anything (except perhaps the obsession with high-stakes testing), but rather to enhance and add new layers to already existing school practices.

The present article has two main aims. The *first* is to review and make sense of the new paradigm of the flourishing student, by subjecting it to philosophical and educational scrutiny as a specific account of well-being. Current advocates worry that the ideal of flourishing may be understood as a 'bland statement of the obvious' (White, 2011, p. 2), or devalued through arbitrary and indiscriminate uses to cover whatever ingredients we may want to include in our conception of children's well-being (Wolbert, de Ruyter and Schinkel, 2015, p. 126). In order to convey just how specific, rich and illuminating this ideal can be, it is instructive to elicit its details, both as presented by current advocates in educational theory and by philosophical background figures. *Second*, against those who do not take Aristotle as their explicit starting point, I show how contemporary accounts of flourishing are largely compatible with Aristotle's account (hereafter referred to as *AF*) or can be amplified by drawing more explicitly on it. Throughout I ask, at regular junctures, about the specific role of teachers in developing flourishing students. This strategy is meant to keep the eye on the

overarching prize of saying something relevant about flourishing as the ultimate goal of educational activities, including school work.

The plan is roughly this. In Section 2, I make some initial comments about flourishing accounts as a species of well-being accounts and discuss some of their characteristics. Sections 3 and 4 explore two proposed preconditions of *AF*, external necessities and students' sense of meaning or purpose, the first of which was given high priority by Aristotle himself. Section 5 then addresses *AF* head-on by looking at its standard constituents. It also compares *AF* to the latest educational accounts of student flourishing and offers some concluding remarks.

## 2. FLOURISHING AS A SPECIES OF WELL-BEING

White (2011) uses the terms 'well-being' and 'flourishing' (and indeed 'fulfilment') interchangeably in his book; yet he is aware that there are deeply and ramifyingly divergent accounts of 'well-being' or 'happiness' (as the ungrounded grounder or *summum bonum* of human life) competing for allegiance. Broadly, those can be divided into subjective and objective accounts. A *subjective* account considers the criteria of well-being to be subjective in the sense that they have to do with psychological states (experiences, attitudes, feelings, beliefs) of an agent. If the agent's reports on those states are authentic (both non-deceptive and non-self-deceptive), they are the last words on her well-being. On an *objective* account, however, 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 and to which she may or may not be privy. Those will include psychological states (on which the agent is, then, no unique

authority) but also various externalities concerning the circumstances and the proper or improper (say, virtuous or non-virtuous) running of her life.

There is no space here to offer an extended critique of the main well-being accounts, all of which retain partisans; in any case, those have been well-rehearsed in recent literatures (see e.g. Haybron, 2008). In brief, the most prominent subjective ones are *hedonic* and *life-satisfaction* accounts. On the former, well-being or happiness is identified with pleasure as a raw, undifferentiated subjective feeling. Those accounts are typically criticised for not making a qualitative difference between types of pleasure and for implying that being mindlessly ‘high’ on a pleasure-inducing pill counts as true well-being. On the latter accounts, well-being signals the ratio of one’s perceived life accomplishments and fortunes to one’s aspirations. Those accounts are typically criticised for the counter-intuitive assumption that to enhance well-being, it is as useful to lower aspirations as it is to increase attainments (see e.g. Kristjánsson, 2013, chap. 2). Hedonic and life-satisfaction accounts have been combined to form widely used measures of so-called (overall) subjective-well-being (*SWB*). More relevant for present purposes are the objective accounts, of which the flourishing-as-the-aim-of-education one is an instantiation. In some of those accounts, which are often referred to collectively as *eudaimonic*, well-being refers to, and can be measured via, a range of objective criteria having to do with the optimal functioning of human capabilities (cf. Nussbaum, 2011; Wilson-Strydom and Walker, 2015). As the rest of this article is taken up with developing precisely such an account relevant to education, there is no need to say more about them at this juncture. However, it is worth noting that accounts of subjective well-being as the aim of education also exist (see e.g. Noddings, 2003).

Recent decades have seen many attempts to offer combined accounts of well-being, aimed at capturing both subjective and objective criteria. Two of those are specifically germane to the topic of this article as they have been used extensively in educational contexts. One is the *positive psychological PERMA-model*, capturing positive emotion, engagement, relationship, meaning and accomplishments as criteria of well-being (Seligman, 2011). Notably, the PERMA-model relies more on objective criteria than previous positive psychological models (e.g. Seligman, 2002); for in PERMA even the apparently subjective elements are supposed to be underpinned by (objective) strengths and virtues. Another model is that of *self-determination theory (SDT)* which posits certain innate universal human needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan, Curren and Deci, 2013). Interestingly, *SDT* has also taken an explicitly Aristotelian turn of late after the fathers of the theory, Ryan and Deci, began to collaborate with the Aristotelian philosopher Curren.

It is not difficult to understand why accounts of well-being in school contexts tend to gravitate towards objective criteria. After the demise of the self-esteem industry (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger and Vohs, 2003), education theorists are wary of accounts that simply aim at making students happier about themselves, independent of actual merit. It is also understandable, however, why subjective criteria continue to carry appeal, for it seems churlish to rate a student high on well-being – simply by dint of external criteria – who does not share that assessment and is perhaps deeply dissatisfied with her own life (de Ruyter, 2004, p. 380). One of the advantages of Aristotle's original account of *eudaimonia* is precisely to posit that such a disharmony is not likely to occur since a certain kind of pleasure, close to what is characterised nowadays as 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), will typically ice the cake of a flourishing life. For Aristotle, this specific type of pleasure signals



the completion of flourishing activity: activity which is not only conducive to an independently sought end of *eudaimonia*, but is part of that end. Such activity is true '*energeia*', the actualisation of our true '*ergon*' or functional essence as human beings: a sign of development, progress and fulfilment. Indeed, Aristotle does not seriously consider the possibility that anyone except the virtuously flourishing can experience this type of supervening pleasure, and he deems it wrong to call someone *good* who 'does not enjoy fine actions' (1985, p. 21 [1099a16–20]). It must be remembered, however, that the flow-like state in question is not pleasure *simpliciter* but the experience of complete non-frustration and lack of inner conflict. As it differs in species and value from all other pleasures (1985, pp. 277–279 [1175a21–b24]), we could call it the specific experience of *eudaimonia* in action. Methodologically, this also means that identifying cases of flow (in this Aristotelian sense) can be an indicator of *eudaimonic* happiness (see further in Kristjánsson, 2013, chap. 8). Brighthouse maintains, along those lines, that reported high levels of subjective well-being can count as evidence that a student is flourishing (2006, p. 48). While that is no doubt true as a rough guide, recent research has indicated that agents can (perhaps counter-intuitively) be radically self-deceived about their own subjective well-being (Haybron, 2008).

### 3. THE FIRST PRECONDITION OF FLOURISHING: EXTERNAL NECESSITIES

According to *AF*, and indeed to all the contemporary accounts also, flourishing consists of many elements or parts (Aristotle, 2007, pp. 188–189 [1360b9–18]); hence, there is a need to work out various 'criteria' of flourishing (see e.g. Wolbert, de Ruyter and Schinkel, 2015). It is not always clear in Aristotle's own text which elements are to be understood as

constituents of flourishing and which as its preconditions; indeed commentators disagree on this (for a quick review, see Yu, 2007, p. 188). For present purposes, and in order to develop *AF* further, I will assume that flourishing has two main preconditions: *external necessities* that I explain in this section, and *a sense of meaning and purpose* that I explain in the following section. While the latter precondition is to some extent an addition to original Aristotelian theory, the external necessities are firmly grounded in Aristotle's own works. The word 'external' must be understood quite broadly here to cover various psychological, physical, societal/political and economic aspects of what philosophers call 'moral luck': favourable enabling circumstances that are largely beyond the agent's own direct control. Some of those necessities may, however, be 'internal' to the agent (e.g. a healthy constitution), and some of them may be amenable to some personal control (e.g. exercising to improve stamina; attending a workshop on cognitive behavioural therapy to enhance resilience).

In their moral education incarnation as 'character education', ideals of education for flourishing often come under attack for their apolitical, individualist stance: for assuming that facilitating flourishing is all about fixing individual students without paying any attention to their *habitus* (see e.g. Suissa, 2015). True as this may be about some unsophisticated versions of character education, here is precisely the point at which *AF* comes into its own. Aristotle is acutely sensitive to the background conditions that enable or disable flourishing. It is particularly noticeable how much more demanding *AF* is in this respect than another flourishing theory with which it is often compared nowadays: Confucianism. Both Confucius and his disciple Mencius believed that straitened circumstances had very little bearing on the good life of the individual (see various references in Yu, 2007, p. 187). In that sense, they

were more Socratic (with his the-good-person-cannot-be-harmed thesis) than Aristotelian. In contrast, well-being ‘also needs external goods’, Aristotle says; those who maintain that we can flourish ‘when we are broken on the wheel, or fall into terrible misfortunes, provided that we are good [...] are *talking nonsense*’ (Aristotle, 1985, pp. 21 and 203 [1099a32 and 1153b19–21]; my italics).

What are those resources or goods of fortune that we need to so much as stand a chance of flourishing? Aristotle provided extended lists of those (see esp. 2007, pp. 56–61 [Book I, chap. 5]; cf. Curzer, 2012, chap. 18), but I will only briefly mention six categories. (1) *Close parental attachment and good upbringing/education*. Many commentators even complain that Aristotle is too pessimistic here about children brought up in bad habits ever being able to mend their ways (Aristotle, 1985, p. 292 [1179b11–31]; cf. Kristjánsson, 2015, chap. 5). (2) *Good government, ruling in the interests of the people, and a just constitution*. Aristotle thus politicises the good life explicitly, and even warns specifically against the dangers of excessive inequalities – surely an object lesson for current times (cf. Homiak, 2007). (3) *Enough wealth to make sure we do not come a cropper*. Aristotle has no time for idealisations of happy-go-lucky poverty; rather, he thinks it dissipates and degrades. (4) *A complete life: namely, a life in which we do not die prematurely*. Aristotle wants people to reach a good old age, not for the sake of being able to rest on their laurels, but for life to be long enough to come to some sort of fruition (cf. Curzer, 2012, p. 414). (5) *Health, strength and even minimal physical beauty*. The component of ‘strength’ will include various beneficial psychological qualities, such as grit, which are instrumentally related to flourishing rather than having intrinsic worth. (6) *Friends and family*. Aristotle thinks we need those, *inter alia*, in order to hone and display our virtues.

In the case of some of those items, the distinction between preconditions and constituents of flourishing becomes tenuous or blurred. For example, in one sense, we can think of friends as ‘instruments’ (Aristotle, 1985, p. 21 [1099b1–2]) that confer benefits upon us, necessary in order for us to prosper; in another sense, bonds with our best ‘friends for character’ become indispensably constitutive of (as distinct from conducive to) our flourishing, so much so that the friends become parts of our own selfhood as ‘second selves’ (1985, p. 246 [1166a29–32]; cf. Kristjánsson, 2015, chap. 6).

What I have said above must not be understood to indicate that good fortune is in any way sufficient for flourishing. However many ‘lemons’ life provides me with, only I can turn them into ‘lemonade’ through my concerted effort. Thus, I cannot just sit pretty on my assets, but I need to do something with them; for ‘Olympic prizes are not for the finest and strongest, but for contestants, since it is only these who win; so also in life [only] the fine and good people who act correctly win the prize’ (Aristotle, 1985, p. 20 [1099a1–7]). Abundant moral luck even places extra demands on us, both because the higher the ape climbs, the more he is liable to show his tail, and because a person blessed with external riches has the potential to become not only a *phronimos* (a paragon of ordinary virtue), but a *megalopsychos* (a paragon of extraordinary virtue) whose privileged position commits him ethically to the role of a public benefactor. One always needs to cut one’s coat according to one’s cloth, large or small, in order to flourish.

What I have said above must not be understood to imply either that we are all simply victims to the vicissitudes of good or bad fortune. Aristotle’s position is here, as often, an intermediary one (see Curzer, 2012, p. 419). While lack of external resources disrupts and blocks flourishing in many ways, the human being is not a ‘chameleon, insecurely based’.

Rather, a person's character leaps to the fore when external necessities are missing, in that good people will at least bear misfortune with 'good temper' and – while not 'blessed' – will never become totally 'miserable' by engaging in 'base actions' (Aristotle, 1985, pp. 25–26 [1100b5–1101a10]). These considerations allow Curzer to offer a multi-level theory of *AF*, ranging at the bottom from the *misery* of those without good fortune and any compensating virtue, through mere *lack of flourishing* for those with bad fortune but compensating virtue or good fortune without virtuous activity, up to *flourishing* for those with sufficient good luck and virtuous activity, to the top level of *blessedness* for those with bonus goods of fortune and virtuous activity (2012, p. 421; Curzer prefers to call flourishing and lack of it simply 'happiness' and 'unhappiness'). All that said, the character that 'leaps to the fore' is also partly dependent upon moral luck – namely the excellence of one's moral educators.

Although I have concentrated here on Aristotle's own rich account of the external necessities of flourishing, much the same ideas animate latter-day accounts. This can be best seen from White's informative chapter on what he calls simply 'basic needs' in his book (2011, chap. 4). Not only does White offer much the same considerations as Aristotle would have, he asks penetrating questions about what the school can do to help meet children's basic needs. Brighthouse also observes how the 'low status and stress that accompany relative poverty, and the lack of control over one's conditions of life, diminish people's ability to flourish' (2006, p. 45). Similarly, de Ruyter talks about the circumstances in which a person lives that may make it impossible for her to flourish (2004, p. 383; 2015, p. 95).

White's question about the contribution of the school towards basic needs brings us right to the issue of the role of the teacher. It goes without saying that on any viable conception of flourishing as the aim of education, teachers will be seen as facilitators of students'

flourishing, not least in their inescapable role as *in loco parentis* (Arthur, 2003). When we inquire, however, about how far that role should go beyond helping students develop their excellences, issues of fiendish intricacy arise. In particular, when addressing the ideal role of teachers in the provision of essential external necessities, we quickly enter shark-infected political waters. In the wake of the economic collapse in Iceland, some head teachers decided to offer children free porridge when they arrived in the morning, knowing that little learning takes place on an empty stomach. Such examples sound sweet but simplistic. The more incisive question is how far those efforts should go.

Here is an area where fundamental political views clash, even among those theorists who consider the role of teachers to be an irreducibly moral one. For example, the ardent advocate of the moral dimensions of teaching, Elizabeth Campbell, claims that ‘ethical teachers should be good moral agents and moral models, not moralistic activists’ (2008, p. 612), and she considers social-justice education for teachers (along currently fashionable lines at least) a ‘distraction’ from the core commitments of teaching. Dissenting from such a view, Alasdair MacIntyre nostalgically pinpoints a period in history, during the Scottish Enlightenment, when teachers were agents of social change, and he seems to suggest this as an ideal at which to aim (MacAllister, 2016). At the same time, MacIntyre is not sanguine about the capacities of contemporary teachers to overturn current free-market liberal theory and oppressive capitalist structures – the real reasons why the basic necessities of many children are not met in today’s world. As a matter of fact, he thinks that the dual role of preparing students for real life and helping them develop their potential, places competing and incommensurable demands on teachers, turning them into no less than ‘the forlorn hope of the culture of western modernity’ (1987, p. 16): a truly tragic predicament.

This sticking point is given surprisingly little attention by current flourishing theorists. Even White, whose political viewpoint is essentially left-wing, concedes quite readily that a number of the external necessities are ‘beyond the school’s control’ (2011, p. 30). While that may seem incontestable, it leaves open the question of whether teachers should just bow down, poker faced, to the force of adverse external circumstances impacting on student learning, or whether they should take up arms on students’ behalf. As could be expected, neo-Aristotelians envisage a considerably active political role for educational agents (see e.g. Curren, 2013); but a pessimistic MacIntyrean could ask, in response, if they are simply trading in unrealistic expectations. Do we really want to pile further moral pressure on an already overburdened profession?

Not batting an eyelid when their own students’ interests are undermined by external forces seems to go against the very grain of a moral ideal of teacher professionalism. In that sense, it is difficult to envisage how a committed teacher can avoid being an agent of social change. Much wider questions remain, however, about the extension of that moral commitment to the whole world’s student population. A modest estimate, given today’s economic inequalities, is that 20% of children in the world do not enjoy the basic necessities required either to attend school or at least to make their schooling a flourishing experience. From the point of view of *AF*, the question if a teacher has a moral duty to make her voice heard about such injustices – beyond the parochial interests of her, possibly privileged, own classroom or school – seems to be one which any virtuous practitioner must answer in the affirmative. Perhaps that does turn teaching into a ‘forlorn’ profession, as MacIntyre suggests, but it could be argued that it better be forlorn than morally disengaged and aloof.

The special commitment, as an educational professional, to make one's voice heard about lack of external necessities affecting young learners does not necessarily turn every teacher into a social-justice activist of the sort that Campbell deems professionally supererogatory or distracting. Perhaps a teacher in a privileged Western school could reasonably argue that the interests of young people in the world are best served by devoting all her energy to educating her own students as morally engaged agents, intent on making the world a better place. Moreover, the way in which Campbell uses the term 'social justice' may indicate that she is not talking about social justice in the traditional philosophical sense, from Aristotle to MacIntyre and onwards, but rather in a specific contemporary sense, familiar from current poststructuralism and identity politics – in which case her account and MacIntyre's are not necessarily competing. In any case, *AF* will, arguably, call for an active political contribution from teachers and other educational agents, in order to make sure that the first precondition of student flourishing is universally met.

#### 4. THE SECOND PRECONDITION OF FLOURISHING: A SENSE OF MEANING AND PURPOSE

Some theorists understand the quest for flourishing simply in terms of a quest for purpose and meaning, or at least fail to make a clear distinction between the two (e.g. Flanagan, 2007). I suggest we eschew this equation as unhelpful, both because meaning and purpose are much less demanding ideals than flourishing, and because they constitute necessary but not sufficient conditions of flourishing.

De Ruyter explicitly agrees with the latter reason as least; yet she persists in including meaning and purpose as constituents of flourishing (2004, pp 383–384). There is no



inconsistency in holding that position, but an Aristotelian take on it would be slightly different. On an Aristotelian account, the constituents of flourishing are intrinsically valuable and as such, on that account, they need to satisfy strict moral constraints. A sense of meaning and purpose can, however, easily be amoral or even immoral; Hitler had a distinct, ‘higher’ purpose to his actions. For this reason I prefer to view the sense of meaning and purpose as a precondition of flourishing – ‘internal necessities’, if you like: a box that we need to be able to tick for flourishing to materialise. In that sense, meaning and purpose are more similar to performance virtues such as resilience and grit than to moral virtues such as honesty and compassion; and I have taken strong exception elsewhere to giving the former pride of place in education (Kristjánsson, 2015, chap. 1). Han (2015) has made a bold attempt to elevate purpose to the status of a moral virtue. While he argues convincingly for the amenability of purpose to the formal architectonic of an Aristotelian virtue, he achieves the aim of designating it as a moral, rather than a performance, virtue by (a) moralising its content unduly and (b) giving it a meta-virtuous, directive role that is already occupied in Aristotle’s system by *phronesis* (see the following section). Yet Han’s article serves as a forceful reminder that if we assume a common understanding of the concept of purpose as relating to something valuable beyond the self, this understanding puts a strain on both the proverbial moral-versus-non-moral and instrumental-versus-intrinsic dichotomies.

The quest for (personal, individual) meaning and purpose is very much a 20<sup>th</sup> century concern, motivated by approaches such as existentialism in philosophy, attributivism in psychology and the self-esteem movement in education. Such approaches tend to share an ontological commitment to what can be called hard *anti-self-realism*: the view that personal *selfhood* is nothing but personal *self-concept*: the set of beliefs or attitudes one harbours

about oneself (critiqued in Kristjánsson, 2010). This view may seem alien to older approaches, not least ancient ones. Yet Aristotle anticipated some of those concerns by assuming that in order to lead the blessed life of a *megalopsychos*, one needs not only to be worthy of great things but also to think oneself worthy of them (1985, pp. 97–104 [1123a33–1125a35]). Hence, while remaining a (soft) self-realist, Aristotle incorporated part of self-concept in his very specification of selfhood. Also part of Aristotle’s stock-in-trade is the assumption that the *phronimos* needs to have at her disposal a clear theory of the *telos* (purpose) of human life, which will include her own *telos* as an individual. All that said, while it is not outlandish to graft the demand for a sense of meaning and purpose to the stem of *AF*, the considerations motivating this purported condition of flourishing are very much informed by modern sensibilities and must be seen, therefore, as an extension of *AF*.

In many contexts, the concepts of meaning and purpose can be used interchangeably, as I do mostly below. However, Damon provides a helpful clarification of the subtle difference between them when he specifies purpose as ‘a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at the same time meaningful to the self and consequential for the world beyond the self’ (2008, p. 33). This means that purpose is always directed at a specific, specifiable end, which may or may not be constituted by the means towards it, whereas meaning is more loosely directed at any significant activities. Hence, every ‘purpose’ includes ‘meaning’, but not vice versa. Some researchers only seem to be interested in ‘meaning’ in the sense of ‘higher’ or ‘ultimate’ meaning, even equating that with ‘meaning’ *per se* (see e.g. Flanagan, 2007). However, that is an unhelpful restriction of the concept, not least in so far as it is predicated of young people.

Philosophical accounts of meaning abound. I will briefly mention one here, a simple and often-cited characterisation by Susan Wolf according to which meaning arises when ‘subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness’ in an inexorable bond (2000, p. 9). This definition of meaning as ‘fitting fulfilment’ helps fend off cases that we would hesitate to ascribe meaning to, both of apparently important actions performed with boredom, alienation or listlessness, and of subjectively valued but objectively worthless activities such as someone deriving satisfaction from drinking saucers of mud. Wolf makes the correct conceptual point that the objective worth underlying meaning need not be moral worth; her normative claim that non-moral meaning often can and should trump moral meaning is more contestable, on the other hand, and indeed taken to task by one of the commentators in her book (2000, pp. 90–91). More recent efforts do not seem to be improvements, however. For example, Metz’s (2013) preferred characterisation, according to which meaning in life ‘is a matter of positively orientating one’s and others’ rational nature towards fundamental objects’ (p. 239), smacks of the tendency to replace ordinary meaning with a focus on superior instances. Given the nature of the meaning concept, there is reason to favour an approach such as that of Wolf’s of highlighting the basic concept.

What kind of concept is the basic concept then? Drawing on Russell’s analysis of the concept of ‘virtue’ as a ‘satis concept’ (2009, chap. 4.2), I would argue that similar considerations can be extended to the concept of ‘meaning’ – and indeed also to the concept of ‘flourishing’. All these concepts are ‘satis concepts’: more commonly referred to as ‘threshold concepts’ (see e.g. Curzer, 2012, pp. 400–401), but better understood as a subset of threshold concepts with a vague, rather than a sharp, boundary. ‘Satis concepts’ are such that, for the concept C, something can satisfy it simply by being ‘C enough’ rather than being

‘absolutely C’ or ‘as C as can be’. In most relevant cases, when we have established that an item has passed the ‘satis requirement’, asking further questions about how close to absolute perfection the item is becomes surplus to requirements. Thus, in the case of flourishing, we are normally just interested in whether people are flourishing or not; the additional question of how far down the line of possibly complete flourishing the individual has gone will seem irrelevant, pedantic or even churlish, unless we have some additional aim in mind, such as to establish whether the person be better characterised as a *phronimos* or a *megalopsychos*.

In other words, a question about flourishing or meaning is normally a question about minimal requirements. The answer may be complex, however, for a concept such as ‘flourishing’ with many different ‘satis’ criteria that need to be met. In the case of ‘meaning’, the answer will be simpler, since – on Wolf’s persuasive characterisation – meaning only requires a combination of some subjective attraction and objective attractiveness. This explains why meaning is rightly seen as a necessary but not a sufficient condition of flourishing (see e.g. White, 2011, p. 109; kudos to him for driving this point forcefully home). A young firefighter who loses his life in rescuing a child from a burning house is a paradigmatic example of someone engaging in a meaningful activity; and it would be unfair to refuse to call his life, however short, meaningful. Yet if we characterise his life, given up at an early age, as thriving overall, we are – as Aristotle would put it – ‘speaking nonsense’. The low demandingness of meaning also explains why the lives of young children can typically be seen as over-saturated with meaning. In every simple game they play, subjective attraction and objective attractiveness seem to meet admirably.

Unhappily, however, this simple fact about children is not always reflected in their work when they enter school. It is almost a truism that for many students school work fails to

become a flourishing-instantiating activity simply because it does not carry meaning for them. Instead, they become ensnared by anxiety, emptiness or apathy. Notably, this condition does not seem confined to low-ranking countries in international league tables for grade attainment. For example, Kwon's (2015) careful ethnographic study of high-school classrooms in South Korea – a country which usually occupies a top spot in PISA comparisons – revealed high levels of disaffection and disengagement, as well as a school ethos permeated by a militant culture.

William Damon is the preeminent current scholar on meaning and purpose in classroom contexts. Bent on identifying differences between students who are flourishing and floundering, 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 (2008, p. 60) 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; and 25% were *disengaged*, showing virtually no purpose or meaning-searching aspirations.

In a 2009 BBC film (to which Dr Karen Bohlen directed my attention) called *An Education*, sixteen-year old Jenny Mellor explains to the Headmistress at her prestigious boarding school why she is leaving school to marry a suitor twice her age. She says she has found school boring: 'It's not enough to educate us any more, Mrs. Walters. You've got to tell us *why* you're doing it'. Insensitive to this call, the Headmistress simply repeats platitudes about studying being 'of course hard and boring', but still worth doing for the benefits. An object lesson in how modern teachers should *not* respond to students' call for a

justification of meaning, the question still remains what the ideal role of the teacher should be in helping student satisfy this relevant precondition of flourishing at school. Damon thinks that the main drawback may be that the ‘phenomenon of purposelessness is not widely enough recognized by those to whom young people look for guidance’ (2008, p. 21), with questions about meaning and purpose being systematically squeezed out of the school day (2008, p. 111). A more cynical view would be that teachers often cannot help students find meaning in school work because what is being studied actually does not have objective worth: say, cramming for exams. Part of the problem may also be that teachers often feel uncomfortable and lacking in confidence when talking to students about personal values and ways of meaning-making (Formby and Wolstenholme, 2012).

Damon provides a long list of suggestions for teachers, ranging from placing the ‘Why’-question explicitly at the front of every school subject to bringing in exemplary figures, potential role models, to spark interest (2008, pp. 149, 173). To end on a positive note, Bundick (2011) reports on the significant impact of an apparently simple intervention of a one-time interview with students about purpose, leading on average to benefits for the goal-directed component of purpose nine months later. If the conceptual requirements of meaning are as undemanding as suggested above, it may be that helping students find meaning in school work is not as daunting a task as some teachers seem to think it is. However, as repeatedly highlighted already, finding school work meaningful is not tantamount to being a flourishing student. It is just a first step.

## 5. FLOURISHING IN GENERAL AND AS APPLIED TO EDUCATION

So far I have foregrounded the preconditions of flourishing. It is now time to discuss the ideal itself. An initial worry, encapsulated by White's earlier-mentioned caution against 'blandness', is that a theory of flourishing simply reproduces commonplaces (for example, about good education at school) that – as the proverb says about motherhood – everyone approves of any way. *AF* is, however, not susceptible to that misgiving; it constitutes quite a distinctive and informative (and hence inherently contentious) account of the good life.

The first thing to note about *AF* is that it is a *naturalistic* theory. Any substantive claims it makes are answerable to empirical evidence from the natural and social sciences. This is precisely the reason why a number of current psychologists have taken a shine to it, and also the reason why neo-Aristotelians have been able to take quite a few liberties in 'updating' the original Aristotle in light of contemporary evidence, arguing that this is what he himself would have done. Flanagan calls the current empirical-normative inquiry into the nature and conditions of human flourishing '*eudaimonistic scientia*': scientific inquiry aimed at capturing deep structural features of *homo sapiens*, based on testable hypotheses (Flanagan, 2007, pp. 1, 38, 112). Aristotle would undoubtedly have acquiesced in that formulation.

*AF* rests on one fundamental argument: the so-called *ergon* (function) argument, according to which human beings have a natural function, just as a tree or a tiger: a function that can be elicited by looking at what humans are best at (Aristotle, 1985, p. 15 [1197b25]). Human nature presses towards its specific human function, its humanness, just as the function of the tiger pushes towards its tigerishness. The function peculiar to human beings 'is the soul's activity and actions that express reason'. As 'each function is completed well when its completion expresses the proper virtue', the human good 'turns out to be the soul's activity that expresses virtue' – infused with reason (1985, p. 17 [1198a12–16]). What is

‘proper to each thing’s nature’ (here, reason-infused virtue), is ‘supremely best and pleasantest for it’ (1985, p. 287 [1178a5–7]); hence, to flourish in the distinctive human way will give human beings a kind of pleasure as an ornament (mentioned previously in Section 2). It is thus part of human psychology to enjoy the exercise of our realised human capabilities. The same goes ideally for learning this exercise, for instance at school, so something is not quite right, according to *AF*, if that fails to happen. Flourishing implies not only having virtue but expressing it; therefore, it constitutes an activity rather than a state. Moreover, cultivating one’s flourishing is not just a self-interested activity. Many of its constitutive virtues necessarily (logically and/or empirically) include other people: say, compassion. In some other virtues, such as friendship, the self–other distinction even becomes blurred, with friends constituting ‘second selves’.

In order not to turn against our own nature, we must ‘go to all lengths to live a life that expresses our supreme element’ (Aristotle, 1985, p. 286 [1177b33–34]). Despite the existence of various disabling conditions (recall Section 3), most people who receive a decent upbringing remain capable of achieving flourishing; the reason that many do not is often self-inflicted (see Curzer, 2012, p. 393). Flourishing, as a ‘satis concept’ is not a rarefied ideal. In sum, then, because of the function argument, flourishing can be seen as the intrinsically desirable, ultimate end of human beings. It involves virtuous, reason-infused activity, suitable and peculiar to human beings, achieved over a complete life (see further in Curzer, 2012, p. 418).

To delve more deeply into the nature of the reason-infused virtuous activity, we need to consider the three modes of thinking that Aristotle deems natural to human beings. All those aim at human excellence in the field of knowing, but that field can be divided into the sub-



fields of scientific knowledge (*episteme*), skill in making things (*techne*) and skill in doing things, or more specifically, in acting/reacting in the moral sphere (*phronesis*). True wisdom (*sophia*) in the field of *episteme* is achieved through an understanding (*nous*) of first principles; for example, those of mathematics. *Phronesis* also requires *nous*, namely about the first principles of ethics, but it combines it with mastery of the correct desire to react. Hence, it can help us to think about the content of the good life that we want to live, and to deliberate about plans of action in pursuit of it (Aristotle, 1985, pp. 148–163 [1139a1–1142b31]). This tripartite distinction gives rise to three main types of virtues in *AF*: *moral*, *intellectual* and *technical* (productive). Of those, the moral virtues tend to be given pride of place in contemporary forms of *AF*, with the intellectual virtues a close second. That said, one of the intellectual virtues is indispensable for the moral virtues, namely the virtue of *phronesis* (practical wisdom or good sense), which orchestrates the whole virtue enterprise like a musical conductor. This is why the ordinarily virtuous person is called a *phronimos*.

When *phronimoi* deliberate about how to actualise a virtue, such as justice, they consider all the nuances of the given situation and determine what would count as justice in that situation. That is what is meant by saying that *phronesis* latches itself onto each virtue; we could call this the *constitutive* function of *phronesis*. But *phronesis* is not just responsive to the moral good in ‘some restricted area’, but rather to the whole of what ‘promotes living well in general’ (Aristotle, 1985, p. 153 [1140a25–28]). Thus, *phronesis* can be called upon for adjudication when two different virtues, say justice and compassion, collide. We could call this the *integrative* function of *phronesis*; it helps us to act virtuously in an overall way (see further in Kristjánsson, 2015, chap. 4). In the end, acting correctly only has moral worth

if it is chosen autonomously through the guidance of *phronesis*. Hence, moral virtue is acting for the right virtuous reason, not merely engaging in virtuous-looking behaviour.

Pursuing the moral virtues, such as compassion, and the intellectual virtues, such as critical thinking, is constitutive of flourishing. The technical virtues are of a slightly different ilk. While we need those to flourish also – because, for example, we need to learn a trade to gain employment and secure subsistence – we often have a choice which of those to pursue. So while exercising technical virtue *in general* can be said to be part of flourishing, exercising a *particular* technical virtue is typically not. In many cases also, technical virtues only have an instrumental value with regard to flourishing. In all, they are less peculiarly human; non-human animals can be seen to possess some of them also.

In contemporary forms of *AF*, as already noted, the emphasis is typically on the moral and intellectual virtues (esp. *phronesis*); the same goes for applied *AF* in its incarnation as character education at school. Yet Aristotle himself surprises and shocks readers in Book 10 of the *Nicomachean ethics* by maintaining, somewhat out of the blue, that one of the intellectual virtues, namely contemplation (*theoria*), is actually the supreme human virtue. It suffices to say here that neo-Aristotelians either tend to ignore Book 10, as out of sync with the rest of Aristotle's corpus, or perform exegetical acrobatics in reinterpreting contemplation such that it presupposes the exercise of the moral virtues and/or simply constitutes a 'particularly reflective version of the ethical life' (Curzer, 2012, p. 394; cf. Kristjánsson, 2015, chap. 5).

The crucial question to ask next is to what extent contemporary educational accounts of flourishing follow the Aristotelian precedent. Despite their recent flirtations with Aristotelianism (recall Section 2), neither the positive psychological *PERMA*-model nor

*SDT*-theory make fully harmonious bedfellows with *AF*. The mainstream position on well-being in positive psychology is still seen by many theorists as subjectivist (Tiberius, 2016), although the variables which show up as being associated with *SWB* are increasingly of the *eudaimonic* kind (Seligman, 2011). Rather than focusing on flourishing, with pleasure as a happy fortuitous side-effect, as *AF* would recommend, most positive psychologists still seem to understand this connection the other way round. *SDT*-theory continues to understand flourishing essentially in terms of need satisfaction (Besser-Jones, 2014) rather than through an exercise of practical reason; hence a vital Aristotelian ingredient of ‘intellectualism’ is missing (cf. Hills, 2015). I deliberately evade the question here of whether *PERMA* and *SDT* may be seen to offer alternative accounts of flourishing (*qua* objective well-being) or irreducibly mixed accounts; at all events, they are too far removed from the assumptions of *AF* to merit further scrutiny here. Closer contenders as Aristotelian successors are the current educational philosophers who have jumped on the flourishing bandwagon – despite their apparent reluctance to be characterised as Aristotelians. Wolbert, de Ruyter and Schinkel correctly point out that *AF* is ‘just one conception of human flourishing’ (2015, p. 119). Yet they acknowledge that the criteria for the concept are best derived from Aristotle’s work.

If we start with White’s (2011) conception, he understands flourishing as autonomous, wholehearted and successful immersion in worthwhile pursuits, both activities and relationships (although he leaves room for individual flourishing in societies that do not value autonomy). It would take up too much space here to unpack all the variables in this specification and compare those with *AF*. Suffice to say that White does not depart explicitly from anything that a neo-Aristotelian would want to say (cf. e.g. Snow’s 2015 specification of *AF* as wholehearted, embodied engagement with life), at least if we understand

‘autonomy’ to cover the reason-expressing element of *AF*. Brighthouse (2006) defines flourishing quite similarly as referring to a worthwhile life that contains objective goods and is ‘lived from the inside’ (2006, p. 16), in the sense that the agent identifies with the pursuit of those goods. Brighthouse is also an avid defender of autonomy as an essential component of flourishing, but is perhaps less sensitive to the need for internal and external factors enabling the relevant activity to ‘succeed’ than Aristotle and White would be. De Ruyter believes that human flourishing consists of ‘generic goods that are objectively identifiable and the meaningful interpretation of these goods by the person herself’ (2004, p. 384), who, in the process, is able to ‘make the most of her qualities and live her life to the full’ (2015, p. 92). De Ruyter and her co-authors also identify the following ‘formal criteria’ of a viable flourishing account: that it sees flourishing as intrinsically worthwhile; as the actualisation of human potential; over a whole life; a dynamic state; heading towards objective goods (Wolbert, de Ruyter and Schinkel, 2015). There is less emphasis here than in the other accounts on reason (although it may be implied), and Aristotelians might grumble at de Ruyter’s references to flourishing as ‘a state’ (2015, p. 86), rather than an ongoing activity; otherwise most of what she says sounds recognisably Aristotelian.

To be sure, all these recent authors may be seen to be offering accounts of (student) flourishing that are more in tune with the mindset of *Western liberal democracies* than *AF* (for obvious historical and philosophical reasons); however none of them proposes the sort of all-you-can-eat-value-buffet subjectivism into which contemporary liberalism tends to collapse, and although they foreground self-chosen pluralistic values more than Aristotle did, there is reason to suppose that *AF* is compatible with a (moderate) form of value pluralism (Kristjánsson 2015).

All in all, then, a straight and almost uninterrupted road leads from *AF* to recent accounts of flourishing as the ideal aim of education. No fundamental, irreconcilable differences emerge; if one wants to be pedantic, however, perhaps the current accounts do not allow quite the same space for the mediating role of *phronesis* in adjudicating conflicts between potentially disharmonious components of *eudaimonia* as Aristotle does, although autonomy is probably meant to do part of that job (cf. de Ruyter, 2004, p. 385 on ‘reflective decision-making’). Moreover, none of the current theorists seems to ascribe the same importance to emotions and emotional attachments (as constituents of the good life and of education for flourishing) as *AF* (Kristjánsson, 2007), although *AF* can also be critiqued for ignoring some flourishing-constitutive emotional attachments: namely, awe-inspired attractions to transpersonal ideals (Kristjánsson, 2016).

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 a moot point, however. Brighouse (2006) mentions a revised role for schooling, as building the general potential of individuals rather than fitting them into potential slots in the economy. He also invokes four *new* kinds of educational experiences that students need to have in schools for flourishing: classes to learn about parental life, learning about work–life balance, learning about saving and investing, and about how to make good use of their leisure time. Otherwise, Brighouse does not seem to foresee a radical overhaul of the timetable of academic subjects. For him, education for flourishing is more about the general approach, rather than the specific content, of the curriculum. The same goes for de Ruyter; for her the most prominent feature of education for flourishing lies in teachers passing on knowledge in such a way that children learn to

understand what is conducive to human flourishing (2004, p. 385). White is by far the most radical of the three, perhaps motivated by his fear of the potential ‘blandness’ of the ideal of flourishing in leaving everything as it is. Not only does White want to see a change of emphasis in schooling from comprehensiveness to active engagement with particularities, he also 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’ (2011, p. 145). While all the recent flourishing theorists offer hints about the practical implications of the new paradigm, it is not always easy to pin down exactly what those implications would really mean for current classroom practice. More work remains to be done in that area.

This article has covered a wide terrain. In order to make sense of Aristotelian, neo-Aristotelian and current semi-Aristotelian accounts of flourishing as the aim of education, it has been necessary to make forays – some brief, some more extended – into a number of discursive fields in philosophy and psychology as well as in education. By broaching the topic of human well-being, one inevitably enters into a welter of controversy. By limiting the discussion to objective flourishing accounts of well-being, I have reduced the scope for controversy slightly; yet even within that area, opinions differ considerably. Among the stops on my journey have been the preconditions of any sort of flourishing, consisting both of external necessities and the agent’s own sense of purpose. While both those preconditions are fairly straightforward philosophically, they can be difficult to satisfy in practice, given current socio-economic conditions in the world and the ‘spirit of the times’.

I hope that the tenor of my review will find resonance with both fellow-travellers on, and objectors to, the current flourishing bandwagon. In order to proceed with a constructive dialogue, the first step is always to identify what the consensus is and where the bones of contention lie. Although I have argued that there is less difference between current accounts of flourishing in education and *AF* than one might suspect – and that the former would benefit from drawing more explicitly on the latter – there is no reason to underestimate the extent to which theorists, at different times in history, may disagree on the contours of the good life, even if they subscribe to an ideal of flourishing. This review shows, at all events, that theories of flourishing are making a comeback in today’s educational and psychological theory, and that these new theories have added considerable backbone to our understanding of what it would mean for education to aim at flourishing in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Throughout, I have attempted to elicit the implications of the different philosophical components of flourishing for schooling and classroom practice. I have shown how flourishing theories carve out a demanding role for teachers as facilitators of flourishing. While most of those discussions have taken the form of quick hints, I hope that the hints have sufficed to demonstrate that there is an inexorable link between both classic and modern accounts of flourishing and educational practice. Indeed, the uniqueness of a flourishing paradigm on human well-being lies in its insistence that education and teaching is woven into the very fabric of flourishing – as work in progress until our dying day – and that any effort deserving of the name ‘education’ must be characterised as education for flourishing.

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