

Formal criteria for the concept of human flourishing: the first step in defending flourishing as an ideal aim of education

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Human flourishing is the topic of an increasing number of books and articles in educational philosophy. Flourishing should be regarded as an ideal aim of education. If this is defended, the first step should be to elucidate what is meant by flourishing, and what exactly the concept entails. Listing formal criteria can facilitate reflection on the ideal of flourishing as an aim of education. We took Aristotelian *eudaimonia* as a prototype to construct two criteria for the concept of human flourishing: (1) human flourishing is regarded as intrinsically worthwhile and (2) flourishing means ‘actualisation of human potential’. The second criterion has three sub-criteria: (2a) flourishing is about a whole life, (2b) it is a ‘dynamic state’ and (2c) flourishing presupposes there being objective goods.

Keywords: human flourishing; *eudaimonia*; education; Aristotle; happiness; ideals; formal criteria

Introduction

The concept of human flourishing has been gaining popularity in the field of philosophy of education for some time now. Children should be equipped, at home and in schools, to lead *flourishing* lives, instead of or in addition to merely living a *happy* life. De Ruyter (2004, 377) writes that flourishing is a ‘common denominator’ of what parents hope or wish for their children. Well-known proponents of making human flourishing an overarching aim of education are White (2011; Reiss and White 2013) and Brighouse (2006), amongst many others. Brighouse (2006) urges teachers, policymakers and parents to focus more on what is in the interest of children instead of for example politics or the economy. Both write that children should be broadly educated to be able to live flourishing lives, independent of their contribution to economy.

Virtually all academic writings on human flourishing refer to ancient Greek philosophy, especially to the work of Aristotle. In Aristotelian ethics, the highest good that everything aims at in life, if there is such a thing, is called *eudaimonia*. The concept of *eudaimonia* refers to a state that combines ‘doing well, behaving well and faring well’ (MacIntyre 1967, 59). *Eudaimonia* has been mostly translated as ‘happiness’ (according to MacIntyre [1967, 59] a ‘bad, but inevitable’ translation), but is in contemporary discussion often referred to as human flourishing.¹

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We think that if it is argued that human flourishing should be an ideal aim of education, the first step should be to clarify what we mean by ‘human flourishing’, and what exactly the concept entails. To gain the clarity we need, it is helpful to look into the roots of human flourishing and consider the relation between human flourishing and Aristotelian *eudaimonia*. Therefore, in what follows we take Aristotelian *eudaimonia* as an exemplar or prototype for the idea of human flourishing. From it we derive two formal criteria. We see that, although Aristotelian *eudaimonia* can be seen as the prototype or exemplar (see Gallie 1956) of human flourishing, and although virtually all conceptions of human flourishing hark back, in one way or another, to Aristotle, some conceptions of human flourishing have diverged so far from Aristotle’s conception that they cannot be called eudemonistic or (neo-)Aristotelian. In other words, though formal criteria for the concept of human flourishing are best derived from Aristotle’s work, Aristotelian *eudaimonia* itself is just one conception of human flourishing.

Readers should not expect a thorough Aristotelian exegesis. It has not been our main purpose to analyse Aristotle’s ethics and argue what *we* think *he* wrote that is important for educational theory. We have looked into the roots of thinking about flourishing as a means to the goal of better understanding the concept of human flourishing, with which we hope to show that ‘human flourishing’ is not only a better translation of *eudaimonia*, but a substantive concept for which formal criteria can be listed that are independent of Aristotle’s and (neo-)Aristotelian ethics.

We are convinced that it is of great importance to first set up a clear framework of the concept of human flourishing, by means of formal criteria, in order to contribute to the quality of substantive discussions about education for human flourishing, diverse as they are. Ideally, the presented framework will function as a tool for these discussions. It is not meant to force agreement on one strict idea of flourishing human beings; for that purpose one would need much more substantive criteria than the formal, open, criteria we present here. It does, however, aim to set limits to too loose a use of the concept of human flourishing. We want to emphasise in this article that the concept of flourishing is being used in various, but connected ways, and we make use both of the history and the current use of the concept to show this connectedness. However, those readers who expect a full elaboration on the importance of embedding the concept of human flourishing in the goals of education will be left unsatisfied. This article should be considered as a prelude to that kind of endeavour. In the last part of the article, we make a start by giving examples of what implications formal criteria for ‘human flourishing’ can have for educational theory, with which we hope to underline the relevance of our endeavour.

Flourishing in Aristotle’s philosophy

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle aims to elucidate the highest good in human life, ‘that at which all things aim’. It is not difficult to establish what that highest good is, since there is general agreement that all things aim at what he calls *eudaimonia*, which is a quite objective matter (Annas 1993, 41). *Eudaimonia* is the most final end, since it is always pursued for itself and never for the sake of something else (Aristotle 2009, 10, 1097b and see criterion 1). *Eudaimonia* has traditionally been translated as ‘happiness’, but is currently more often translated as ‘human flourishing’. It is one thing to establish what the highest good in human life is, but another what *eudaimonia* consists in, or how one is supposed to live a life filled with it.

The first thing that becomes clear about *eudaimonia* is that it includes both ethics and subjective well-being (see also Perry 1986; MacIntyre 1967; Kristjansson 2007; Haybron 2008). A good life is according to Aristotle both a morally good life and an enjoyable life, a life in which things go well (MacIntyre 1967, 59; Kristjansson 2013, 29). Perhaps this is the reason that many prefer to translate *eudaimonia* as flourishing, instead of happiness, since the use of the word happiness seems to be restricted to subjective well-being in contemporary philosophy (and other disciplines).

In a sense, Aristotle makes an inventory of what men usually do in life to be able to answer what men best should do, in order for them to come in a state of *eudaimonia* (see criterion 2). ‘Human good turns out to be activity of the soul exhibiting virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete’ (Aristotle 2009, 12, 1098a15–20). He adds immediately that this ‘activity of the soul’ needs to last ‘a complete life’, because acting virtuously for a moment will not get you a flourishing life; this activity will have to be maintained throughout an entire life (ibid Aristotle and see criterion 2a). Or as Kristjansson (2013, 29) summarises:

According to Aristotle, by analysing empirically the proper “function” of human beings (just as we analyse the proper function of a good knife or a good field of wheat), we can ascertain that human flourishing consists of the realisation of virtues of thought and character and the fulfilment of other specifically human physical and mental potentialities over a whole course of life.

Virtues are stable ‘characteristics of the soul’, which show themselves in the action of choosing the right mean between two vices (excess and deficiency), which is always dependent on the situation and the involved person (see also Pakaluk 2006, 385). ‘When our desire and our thinking co-operate in the best way, we have moral excellence or virtue’ (Wivestad 2008, 314). For example ‘courage’ is a virtue, balancing between ‘rashness’ and ‘cowardice’; what in some situation is courageous, could be judged rash and irresponsible in another (MacIntyre 1967, 66–67). Human beings need practical wisdom (*phronesis*) or the insights of a practically wise person (*phronimos*) in order to be able to act virtuously; to be able to differentiate rashness from real courage. *Phronesis* is considered an intellectual virtue, which ‘binds all the virtues together’ (Wivestad 2008, 314); it ‘is not just one virtue among others but is rather a necessary ingredient in all the others’ (Dunne 1999, 240).

Virtuous activity needs to be trained. Only by performing virtuous activity continually, by emulating how practically wise persons perform virtuous activity, a person can inculcate the habit and become a virtuous man (MacIntyre 1967, 64). Only by practise in finding a ‘well-balanced co-operation’ between what we desire and what we think we should do, we will incorporate the virtues (Wivestad 2008, 314). This notion of training is characteristic for Aristotle’s theory. For Aristotelian *eudaimonia*, and for flourishing in general, a process of development is required (see criterion 2b).

However, virtuous activity is not all there is to it. It is possible, says Aristotle, to be a virtuous person without living a flourishing life, because people need external goods as well (Aristotle 2009, 14, 1099a30–1099b5). It is very difficult, he writes, to ‘do noble acts’ without the advantages of, for example, ‘good birth’, social relations, and beauty. People have to have a bit of luck as well in the course of their lives, it seems (see Nussbaum 1986; and see criterion 2c).

So, in order to live a flourishing life, a good life, an *optimal* life, which is a combination of ‘faring well, behaving well, and doing well’ (MacIntyre 1967, 59), human beings have to learn to become virtuous persons and have to be lucky to lead a prosperous life.

Eudaimonia is not ‘a passive end state’ (Kristjánsson 2013), but an activity. It is what we shall be calling ‘a dynamic state’ (criterion 2b) later in this article. Perfect *eudaimonia* then is the state of a perfect fit between our desires and that what is the right thing to do in a given situation, or in other words; always desiring the right thing, without ‘any counter motivation’ being produced (Annas 1993).

The concept of human flourishing: two criteria

In most literature, human flourishing is perceived and put forward *as an ideal aim* of education (see for example Brighouse 2006; Reiss and White 2013; and Nussbaum 2010). We think it is important to pay attention to the ways in which an ideal can be understood, in order to make clearer how the proposed criteria should be understood. Ideally, a human being’s life will develop in such a way – and education will contribute to this development – that all of her potential can be actualised, whilst creating a harmonious balance between her potentials and other goods she aims to realise and that she is happy with it too. This is ‘picture perfect’; and it represents a conception of perfect flourishing, which is practically unrealisable. A more realistic ‘picture’ of a flourishing life takes into account that ‘life will get in the way’. De Ruyter (2015, 89) writes that ‘when one takes into account what people can achieve given their circumstances and abilities, one has a realistic conception of flourishing in mind’. The ideal of perfect flourishing is still being pursued, but one realises that we, human beings, cannot always create the best circumstances for us to flourish, nor are we able to fully optimise all of our abilities (see also Lawrence 1993). And above that, sometimes we just do not succeed in doing our best, or it is simply difficult to decide what the best thing to do would be (when values conflict for example). The ideal of flourishing functions as a regulative ideal to structure our development and give us (high) aims to strive at (see Emmet 1994). But we need not maintain that human beings do not flourish until their lives are perfect, nor that it is ‘bad’ to not have a perfect life; in fact, it is human. The formal criteria we propose reflect this high goal of perfect flourishing; but it is important to keep in mind that flourishing is a matter of degree, and that the criteria need not be applied so strictly as to demand perfection.

As said before, according to Aristotle we can only judge whether someone has had a flourishing life at the end of that life (Aristotle 2009, 12, 1098a17–19). On the one hand, it makes sense, in reference to the ideal, to attribute flourishing to an entire life. But on the other hand, that is not the only way in which the word flourishing is used in daily life. It is not awkward to speak of ‘flourishing children’ or to call someone a flourishing human being who is not dead yet (or on her deathbed). Therefore, we think that it is helpful to distinguish between ‘a flourishing life’ (being the ideal) and the verb ‘to flourish’ (representing an actual evaluation, e.g. De Ruyter 2007, 2015). A flourishing life refers to the (Aristotelian) ideal of flourishing throughout an entire lifetime while the verb ‘to flourish’ is used in situations where an evaluation is made about a certain time-slice in someone’s life and in which less demanding standards are applied (see De Ruyter 2015, 89). That is why we, for example, can say that a child has a flourishing childhood. This gives her – no doubt – a large advantage for the rest of her life, but does not guarantee a flourishing life; we don’t know yet if, and to what degree, this child will be able to fulfil the ideal of a flourishing life throughout the rest of her life. In the last part of this article, we further elaborate on the implications that the ideal of a flourishing life can have for education, but first we clarify the proposed criteria.

We propose two criteria, of which the second criterion has three sub-criteria. Every actual conception of flourishing should meet all five criteria. Other uses of the term (uses that do not meet these criteria) are possible, but fail to capture what is distinctive about flourishing as opposed to for instance happiness. The first criterion is the same as that which Aristotle starts his search with; establishing that man's final end is something that is always pursued for itself and never for the sake of something else (Aristotle 2009, 10, 1097b). Therefore, we propose that flourishing should be perceived as being intrinsically worthwhile. The second criterion is a broad definition of human flourishing; the idea of 'actualising your potential'. Criteria 2a, 2b and 2c are sub criteria, which give further content to this idea of 'actualising your potential'. These criteria have all been derived from Aristotelian *eudaimonia*. However, as has been said in the introduction, from comparing Aristotle with more recent conceptions of human flourishing, we conclude that the formal criteria are broader than the interpretation of and path to human flourishing that Aristotle had in mind, which shows that *eudaimonia* in itself is best considered a conception of human flourishing.

1. Flourishing is intrinsically worthwhile

Human flourishing is perceived as that-for-the-sake-of-which human conduct is done (Rasmussen 1999). It is, in Aristotle's terms, 'complete': while many activities or virtues can be pursued for themselves, we also choose them because we believe that we will be happy if we do so. Flourishing, however, is always chosen for itself and never for the sake of something else (Aristotle 2009, 10, 1097b). Thus, we do not strive to flourish in order to reach some other goal. It is the other way around.

We should add that there are also activities that contribute to a person's flourishing that are not necessarily done *in order* to flourish. For example, when a person prefers spending time and money on eating nice food, he might do that just to enjoy nice food. Or, think of someone who engages in a romantic relationship; she did not do that so she could lead a flourishing life, but because she fell in love. The enjoyment of good food or a loving relationship might be constitutive elements of flourishing, but they were not done *in order to* flourish. Sufficient for the purpose of our formal criteria is therefore to conclude that (a) flourishing is an intrinsic good, and that (b) flourishing is worth striving for, so that (c) flourishing should be perceived as intrinsically worthwhile.

2. The actualisation of the human potential

We state that the core of flourishing is that it focuses on a notion of optimising 'the human being qua human being'; the actualisation of human potential (for instance in Aristotle 2009; Kraut 1979; Rasmussen 1999; De Ruyter 2012; Huta 2013).

When we say someone is flourishing, we mean that someone is functioning at a top-level – an optimal level. This 'top' is agent-relative; how well someone's doing depends on her potential and the possibilities she gets in her life (see also Lawrence 1993), although a certain minimal threshold is defined objectively. If someone is not or barely capable of actualising any potential (because of, for example, congenital disabilities or severe trauma during life), we will not say that they are flourishing human beings. How well someone (who is above this minimal threshold) is doing in *developing towards* that optimal level

can also be judged. People can, in that sense, be compared with each other on their level of flourishing, by comparing the progress they have made relative to their own optimum.

De Ruyter (2012, 28) uses the term ‘optimiser’ for someone who develops herself in an optimal way. Flourishing persons, in her words, are ‘persons who have developed (and are still developing) their possibilities to the full’ (27). Developing in an optimal way, and in that sense to the full, should not be mistaken for ‘getting the most out of something (i.e. your life or a given situation)’, a phrase that is popular in our current society. Children are sometimes encouraged to become the ‘best’, which can be very confusing if the difference between becoming ‘the best version of yourself’ and ‘the best pupil in school’ has not been made clear. The notion of ‘actualising the human potential’ shows that human flourishing is not the same as happiness (in a subjective sense). To feel happy, someone does not have to strive to actualise their potential. For example, the famous character Oblomov from the novel by Gontsjarow (1958) is quite happy living his life doing literally almost nothing, leaving a large part of his potential un-actualised. Unless it is argued that ‘doing nothing’ is what makes Oblomov the best version of himself he can be, we would not say that he has had a flourishing life.

2a. Life as a whole

To be able to say that someone is flourishing or has flourished, one has to look at her life as a whole (Aristotle 2009; Annas 1993; MacIntyre [1981] 2001). ‘Life as a whole’ can be interpreted in a temporal sense, as referring to life from birth until death, as we have already referred to previously when we made the distinction between ‘a flourishing life’ and the verb ‘to flourish’.

However, there is still another way in which life as a whole can be interpreted, namely in a holistic sense, as referring to the whole of one’s life spheres. This holistic interpretation is crucial for ‘flourishing’. A judgement about whether someone is flourishing takes into account all life-spheres. In that sense it is about a whole life, rather than one or some of its parts. For example, when someone is a successful banker, has a booming career and makes a lot of money, but neglects his wife and three children, because he works for over 80 hours a week and is never home, we would presumably not consider him to flourish. We hesitate to attribute ‘flourishing’ to him, because he neglects a significant part of his life-spheres. He could be happy, though, in the subjective sense of feeling happy. Or, as for example MacIntyre (MacIntyre and Dunne 2002, 10) puts it:

What is important is to recognise that each life is a single, if complex, narrative of a particular subject, someone whose life is a whole into which the different parts have to be integrated, so that the pursuit of the goods of home and family reinforces the pursuit of the goods of the workplace and vice versa, and so too with the other diverse goods of a particular life. To integrate them is a task, a task rarely, if ever, completed.

In the case of the successful banker there is not enough integration, no balance, because there is neglect; and his wife and children suffer from it.

2b. A dynamic state

Development is characteristic of human flourishing (for instance in Aristotle 2009; Lawrence 1993; Hurka 1999; Kraut 2007; Huta 2011; De Ruyter 2012). Development is necessary to actualise the human potential, because people cannot optimise themselves by

pushing a button or drinking a magical potion. Nor can a person develop someone else's potential; it is a personal process (Annas 1993, 37, Haybron 2008, 157). In other words, one has to do something in order to become a flourishing human being. According to Kraut (2007, 140), there is a widely accepted framework for thinking about normal human development, which gives us 'platitudes' that help us determine what is good for us. There is no clear beginning or ending to the process of development. Only when a human being dies, development has ended for that particular human being (at least, for all we know).

We can characterise this process of lifelong development as a sort of 'dynamic state'. A 'state' because flourishing is an attainable state – but it is not a static condition, but characterised by ongoing development, effort to sustain it and striving to improve it. Thus, it is a dynamic state.

2c. *Objective goods*

It is characteristic of conceptions of human flourishing to acknowledge that there are things that are good for everybody. Some of these objectively good things are constitutive of a flourishing life, for example social relationships, other objective goods are good capacities, the development of which will contribute to the flourishing of human beings, for example *phronesis*, practical wisdom, which Aristotle deems necessary to exercise all other virtues. For our purpose (open, formal criteria), it suffices to say it is a common denominator in most literature on human flourishing that objectively good human capacities are being developed (see for example Hurka 1999; Kraut 2007; Huta 2011; De Ruyter 2012).

Happiness, however, does not need this kind of external judgement about whether something is good or not. Popular conceptions of happiness seem to centre on subjective feelings of well-being only. In conceptions of human flourishing, this is not the case (for example in Aristotle 2009; Anscombe 1958; Hurka 1999; Rasmussen 1999). We do not imply, however, that the concept excludes subjective assessments as part of human flourishing. Several authors argue that human beings do not flourish, unless they themselves know or feel that they do (De Ruyter 2007, 27; but also Aristotle 2009; Rasmussen 1999; De Ruyter 2004; White 2006; Haybron 2008; Griffin 1986). They make a plea for a 'mixed theory', a conception of human flourishing that acknowledges the importance of both objective and subjective goods.

Flourishing in Kant's philosophy

Five formal criteria for 'human flourishing' have been proposed for which Aristotle's *eudaimonia* functioned as a prototype. We have said in the introduction that although *eudaimonia* has been used as an exemplar, it is in itself a conception of human flourishing. In this section, we give an example of a conception of human flourishing that differs a great deal of Aristotle's, namely that of Immanuel Kant.

It has often been argued that Kant had limited or no room for a conception of human flourishing. For example, Hill (1999) writes that Kant's conception of happiness cannot be a conception of human flourishing, because happiness is not an important intrinsic goal of Kant's moral rules, which is a criterion (1) of flourishing. We argue that this explanation is based on the mistake of taking Kant's conception of happiness as a conception of flourishing. A conception of flourishing should not be sought in Kant's ideas on happiness,

but in Kant's notion of the highest good, which is his 'final end' and an intrinsically worthwhile good (see criterion 1). For Kant, the highest good conceivable is a combination of moral perfection and (deserved) happiness (*Glückseligkeit*) (MacIntyre [1981] 2001, 85; Stange 1920, 98; Haybron 2008, 36; Denis 2008, 85). This optimal combination of striving for moral perfection and feeling happy, which we recognise in Aristotle, could very well be a conception of human flourishing. Kant has an ultimate goal of conduct in mind, which is some kind of optimal state of being.

Can we really say that this optimal state of being is flourishing, i.e. the actualisation of human potential? Denis (2008, 86) argues, following Engstrom (1996), that the similarities between Aristotelian *eudaimonia* and Kant's highest good suggest at least a 'rough' conception of human flourishing. The following discussion confirms this suggestion. We have already shown that criterion 1 has been fulfilled, since perceiving flourishing as intrinsically worthwhile has been our starting point.

Kant puts great emphasis on development in his description of the highest good 'of a possible world' (Denis 2008). He sees the full development of characteristic human capacities (see Kraut 2007, 140) as our 'destiny' and as necessary for realising a state of optimal being in the whole world (Denis 2008, 91). Kant sees some kind of threshold for human beings to reach in order to flourish, yet is at the same time convinced that human beings are always on their way towards that threshold, and that this dynamic is ongoing, from generation to generation (criterion 2b) (Kant 1996). He questions whether this optimal state of being can ever be reached. He devotes several comments to the practical possibility of the highest good, but he seems to conclude that it is rather impossible. It can only be found in 'endless progress' towards it (Kant 1996, 102).

The most comprehensive conception of flourishing in Kant's writings is informed by his account of duties to oneself (Denis 2008, 97). This is because many of our duties require us to do things in order to become the best version of ourselves we can be. 'We are to consider ourselves as moral beings who are human beings, with specifically human drives and capacities; to cultivate our innate capacities; and to bring our emotions into some measure of harmony with reason' (97). Denis shows that Kant had a view on development that focused on the human being qua human being, on actualising the human potential whilst fulfilling our duties (see criterion 2).

We have not yet discussed the remaining criteria of (2a) judging the flourishing life as a whole and (2c) the necessity of referring to objective goods. The criterion of objective goods is easily met. In the very first lines of the Critique of Practical Reason, Kant explains the difference between the maxims of someone's will, which are subjective, and the practical laws, which are their objective counterpart (Kant 1996, 17). Moral perfection, as part of Kant's conception of flourishing, presupposes obedience to these objective practical laws, which makes them a necessary part of his conception of flourishing as well.

It is difficult to explicitly clarify Kant's notion of 'life as a whole' on the basis of his writings. It is apparent from Kant's writings on morality that moral perfection should be sought after in all life-spheres. It is not good enough to just be morally good 'at home'. However, there is more to life than morality, as Kant too acknowledges. Whether or not one should flourish in the (non-moral) life 'as a whole', is not explicitly elucidated by him. We think that a holistic perspective in Kant's work is most clearly found in his thoughts on the full development of human capacities, assuming that full development means development in all life-spheres (Denis 2008, 91).

We conclude that Kant's notion of the highest good meets the five criteria and thus can be called a conception of human flourishing. There are similarities with Aristotelian *eudaimonia*, but there is also an important difference. Happiness remains conceptually distinct from virtue within the highest good (Denis 2008, 85). Kant thought they were 'extremely heterogeneous concepts' (Kant 1996, 93), whereas in *eudaimonia* they are intertwined. It is very important for Kant's moral theory that happiness is not part of moral goodness, because he claims that it should not be the ultimate goal of moral perfection. A person does not strive for moral perfection in order to become happy (99–100). Another difference noted by for instance Denis and Conly is that in Kant's ethics there is more attention for the differences in desires, temperaments and situations of different people, which leads to great differences in what their flourishing lives might look like (Denis 2008, 108). Although Aristotle also emphasises the individuality of flourishing, his view on 'the flourishing life' was more 'standardised' than Kant's (Denis 2008, 98; Conly 1988).

Implications for educational theory: conclusion

Two formal criteria of 'human flourishing' have been proposed: First, flourishing should be perceived as intrinsically worthwhile (1). Second, human flourishing means 'the actualisation of human potential' (2), which entails that to be able to say that someone flourishes, we argue that one has to look at her life as a whole in a holistic sense (2a); that in order to actualise human potential a continuous developmental process is required, which shows that flourishing is perceived as a 'dynamic state' (2b); and that there is a necessary reference to objective goods, in the sense that there are human capacities that are objectively good for a person as well as certain external goods people need in order to live well (2c). Aristotelian *eudaimonia* was used as an exemplar for these criteria, but it was also shown to be just one conception of human flourishing. Using Kant's work as an example, we have shown that the concept is wider, and allows for various conceptions.

Now, what does this mean for flourishing as an aim of education? It seems that 'human flourishing' as an overarching aim of education has been proposed out of discontent with the current school system (see Brighouse 2006; Reiss and White 2013). Philosophers of education have actually been asking themselves the same question as Aristotle did: what is *really important* in life? And if 'leading a flourishing life' is the answer, what then is *really important* to teach our children? Surely not (only) how to get a well-paying job and be 'profitable' to our society (Nussbaum 2010). We should equip our children so that they can contribute to society in a meaningful way and get the best chance of a leading a flourishing life.

We think that listing formal criteria for the concept of human flourishing can contribute to clarifying why *flourishing* is being defended as an ideal aim of education and not something else. We suspect that 'flourishing' is not an arbitrary word-choice, that philosophers of education have reasons to use it, and we believe it should not be chosen casually. We fear that without some limits (on a formal level) the concept of flourishing might devalue until it is used indiscriminately. The reasons for using this particular concept would then evaporate, and flourishing would become 'just another' popular phrase to agitate against the current aims of education. Listing formal criteria, as we have attempted to do in this article, can facilitate reflection on conceptions of human flourishing, it might elucidate to which aspects conceptions are similar and where they differ, and third, as said, it can be a tool to discriminate between flourishing and related terms, such as (subjective) well-being and happiness.

For example; take criterion 1; ‘flourishing is intrinsically worthwhile’. Sometimes well-being and flourishing are both used in the same context, suggesting that they can be used interchangeably (for example in White 2011; Keyes 2007; Fredrickson and Losada 2005; Seligman et al. 2009). White uses the word ‘well-being’ as the overarching aim of education in his 2011 book. He proposes that ‘well-being’ is an ideal aim that is intrinsically worthwhile, and although it is sometimes a bit confusing for the reader that besides ‘well-being’ White uses ‘flourishing’ and ‘a flourishing life’ as well, in principle ‘well-being’ and ‘flourishing’ can indeed be used interchangeably (assuming for now that the other criteria are also met). However, Seligman et al. (2009, 302) argue not only that well-being ‘can and should be taught’ in schools, but also that the well-being of children can enhance their school performances. In the description of criterion 1, we have written that flourishing is intrinsically worthwhile, and is not pursued in order to reach some other goal. Rather, it is typical of flourishing that it is the other way around. Therefore, it is likely that Seligman et al. mean ‘subjective well-being’ here (which might indeed contribute to better performances at school), and that in this case well-being and flourishing cannot be used interchangeably.

Due to the confines of this article, we are only able to hint in the direction of an answer to why *flourishing* is being defended as an aim of education, but one thing that we think has become clear is that striving for a flourishing life is a life long journey in which one keeps asking what might bring out the best of oneself. As we have written, flourishing is characterised by ongoing development, striving and effort to sustain it. We think that one of the reasons of using the concept of flourishing as an aim of education is the emphasis on development and the development of objectively good capacities. This appeals to a strong intuition of educators to want for children that ‘they make something out of their life’. As said before, this distinguishes flourishing from currently popular conceptions of happiness that seem only to require that people ‘feel good’ about what they are doing, whatever it is that they are doing. Another, related, reason might be that ‘flourishing’ inevitably puts an ethical question in the centre of educational theory by asking what those ‘good’ capacities could be, and who can judge whether they are really ‘good’.

But, is this not asking too much of children, risking to turn them into stressful, unhappy overachievers? Should we not just try to equip children to have a nice life, and focus on being satisfied with whatever it is that happens to them in life (be *happy* with it)? We don’t think so. We believe it is worth defending flourishing as an aim of education, because we do think it important for both educators and children to have high aims, so that educators will strive to create the optimal conditions for children and for children to get the best chance to develop themselves towards the ideal of an optimal life. We side with Emmet (1994), where she argues that regulative ideals, impossible as they may seem or are to realise, give us direction in life (see for instance Emmet 1994; Frankfurt 1999; De Ruyter 2007, on the importance of ideals). However, we do understand that the open, formal criteria that we have proposed might invoke connotations of competitiveness or images of over-achieving, performance-oriented children (and educators). We can only stress once more that flourishing is a matter of degree, and that it is important to keep in mind the distinction between the ideal of flourishing and the expectations with regard to what human beings can realise – the criteria need not be applied so strictly to a ‘real’ life as to demand perfection. Moreover, flourishing is not about winning, or becoming better than the rest. Flourishing is about self-knowledge, making good choices and creating a balance in a ‘whole’ life.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Note

1. There is a lot of discussion about whether *eudaimonia* 'should' be translated as happiness or human flourishing. Annas (1993) and Kraut (1979), among others, translate *eudaimonia* as 'happiness'. We will not embark on this discussion here, since our interest is in the use of the concept of human flourishing. We think that it is important to bear in mind the strong subjective connotations happiness has in our current society, and recognise that our current ideas about happiness are miles away from Aristotle's (De Ruyter 2004; Haybron 2008). It is therefore at least 'practical' to investigate the concept of human flourishing instead of happiness, because flourishing has less strong associations in temporary debate.

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