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POTTERING IN THE GARDEN? ON HUMAN FLOURISHING AND EDUCATION

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What will become of all that flourishes in this world?
Hampole *Psalter* Cant. 518 (c.1340)

1. INTRODUCTION

When we ask parents which hopes or wishes they have for their children, we expect to get different answers, but also that these have a common denominator, namely that their children will lead a flourishing life. Of course parents may expect or even be certain that the lives of their children will be difficult; parents who live in deprived areas or whose children have a severe physical disability know that their children's lives will be challenging, but it would be against normal expectations if they would wish or hope this for their children. For, although a flourishing life is not necessarily a life without struggle, it is reasonable to assume that adversarial circumstances make it more difficult to flourish.

In this paper I want to address two related questions: What makes life flourishing and how can parents and teachers contribute to the likelihood that children will lead a flourishing life? The first section addresses the meaning of the concept 'flourishing'. The second section describes the conception of 'flourishing' that I underwrite as well as the conditions required to come to lead a flourishing life. In the third section I explore the educational implications of this concept.

2. HUMAN FLOURISHING

The verb 'to flourish' intimates that a person is thriving, has a good life or that life is good to her. Although the use of the term 'human flourishing' is relatively new, the debate about the concept is of course centuries old. I think that translating the Greek *eudaimonia* into human flourishing instead of happiness is advantageous, because the term 'happiness' has hedonistic overtones and often a too

narrow focus on particular feelings and states of a person. Certainly, 'happiness' is not necessarily interpreted in a hedonistic or ego-centred way, but the current dominant understanding is that being happy means being joyful, satisfied or self-content (see for instance Baumeister, 1991). I also prefer to use 'human flourishing' instead of 'well-being', because this term might give less cause for the idea that people cannot flourish if they do things they have an interest in, but which are not necessarily in their interest. A lot can and should be said about the distinction between 'in one's interest' and 'having an interest in', but for now I take the position that one can flourish in situations in which the interest of someone else prevails over one's own. For example, some mothers flourish by devoting their own life to the well-being of their children and some people, like Albert Schweitzer, set aside their own interest for the care of others. These people flourish through their supererogatory acts, which are by definition not done out of or in one's own interest.

It is common to use the concepts 'flourishing life' and 'good life' interchangeably and I will do so as well, even though there seem to be two arguments against perceiving them as being similar. First, it is questionable whether or not 'flourishing' and 'having a good life' refer to the same level of well-being. In saying that someone is thriving we indicate that she is doing really well, that she is prospering or excelling, which suggests that her life has a particular level of goodness. Having a good life does not necessarily imply a high(er) level of well-being, for instance when 'a good life' is interpreted as 'a good enough life'. In this case, a person's life is fine, or with a popular expression, OK, which indicates that she is doing well, but not extremely well. Secondly, it is possible to make a distinction between having a good life and living a good life (Frankena, 1970, 1973). The first is a morally neutral, prudential conception of 'good'. When we say at Anna's funeral that she has had a good life or that life was good to her, we mean that her life was not overshadowed by difficulties or that she had a prosperous life. In saying that she lived a good life, we make a moral judgement. We do not have to believe that the life of the person was morally superior or characterised by moral supererogatives to say she lived a good life, but it does not seem to accord with our linguistic intuitions to say that an immoral person lived a good life. Thus, 'a good life' can be used in a moral and non-moral sense and for a moral and non-moral evaluation. This distinction does not seem applicable to 'flourishing'. Although we might not say that all in all Hitler led a flourishing life, we could say that he did flourish during the heights of the Nazi-regime. Equally, a person can lead a morally questionable life, for instance because she is

an active member of a racist organisation, but flourish in this organisation, as a partner and mother and through her work.

For our understanding of 'flourishing', it is also helpful to make two other distinctions in the way in which the term is used. The first distinction refers to the length of flourishing. On the one hand, 'flourishing' can be used to give an indication about the quality of a life of a person over a longer period of time, to give a positive evaluation of a person's life overall. On the other hand it is used for particular periods in which we believe the person is flourishing. For instance, when someone is enjoying a holiday after a very stressful period at work and we see her relax and prospering by walking in the mountains and reading novels we would say that she (finally) flourishes. This example also illustrates that it is possible to say that a person flourishes at a particular moment, but overall does not lead a flourishing life. The second distinction is related to the scope of flourishing. On the one hand, we use 'flourishing' in a general way, which refers to an overall evaluation as well. Here the criterion is not time, but aspects or domains of life. On the other hand we can say that a person is flourishing in a particular role. This allows one to say that a person is flourishing as a mother or as a teacher, but is not flourishing overall, for instance because her relationship with her partner is problematic. This possibility gives rise to the question of whether flourishing is a threshold term or if it is gradual, i.e. if one can say that someone flourishes only if she prospers in all the domains or that even though she does not thrive in one domain, she flourishes up to a certain level. I would argue that it is both, in a certain sense; it depends on the intrusiveness of the non-flourishing in a domain. For instance, while it is difficult to imagine that Alice, who has no alternative but to do a debasing job that she detests, flourishes as long she is in that position, we can envisage that Eileen, who has a job that is not great and therefore does not contribute to her flourishing but who does not attach any negative value to it, can flourish nevertheless. It is however correct to say that one would flourish more if one's job would be conducive as well.

3. CONCEPTIONS OF HUMAN FLOURISHING

What makes life a flourishing life and under which conditions or with which characteristics a person will thrive, is a matter of contention within philosophy and additionally there are diverse cultural and religious substantive conceptions of a good life. It is for instance quite obvious that Buddhists have a different conception of human flourishing than hedonists. I will first give a concise description of

the two major, opposing, theories of human flourishing, namely the objective account found in objective-list theories and perfectionism and the subjective account found in hedonistic, actual desire theories and informed desire theories. Both have characteristics that I find necessary for a theory about human flourishing and therefore I will defend a combined theory or middle position.

Human Flourishing can be Objectively Determined

Objective theories argue that we can objectively identify characteristics of human life independent of a person's (emotional) endorsement which, when satisfied, entail human flourishing. Whether or not a person likes the goods, wants them or values them is irrelevant for the judgement that the goods are conducive to a person's flourishing (see for instance Arneson, 1999). The goods are intrinsically good, or good *per se*. Items on the objective lists are related to characteristics of human beings or their biological characteristics, for instance health and physical pursuits, friendship/social relations, safety, intellectual development, creative development, freedom and materialistic possessions (see Aristotle, 1985; Hurka, 1993; Maslow, 1970; Raz, 1986).

The idea that flourishing is independent of the perspective of an agent, that it does not require the acknowledgement of a person that she flourishes, does not conform to my linguistic or psychological intuition. I fail to see how we can say that a person is flourishing if she does not share that evaluation. Someone might object and say that we can give her the objective reasons as to why she is flourishing and that the correct criteria will change her evaluation. This, however, is only sensible if we regard her subjective acknowledgement as being necessary for her flourishing, for if her flourishing is not increased or diminished by her own evaluation, there is no reason to convince her. Therefore, this objection affirms the position it tries to reject.

Human Flourishing is Subjectively Assessed

According to a subjective interpretation of human flourishing, humans thrive if and only if they themselves feel or know they do, i.e. humans flourish if they experience or believe they flourish and only if they do, do they flourish. This can be interpreted as having a particular state of mind, for instance being exhilarated, 'over the moon' or deeply satisfied. However, such an account is too narrow and educationally suspect. First, it reduces human beings to one-dimensional, hedonistic, creatures and would justify (educational) practices which aim to ensure that people are constantly in a happy state, for instance

by providing happy pills or connecting children from early age onto Nozick's famous experience machine. Secondly, it restricts the kind of desires to those which give us pleasure and it is clear that people have desires which do not lead to this psychological satisfaction but do contribute to their well-being. For instance, my desire to look after my ill father can certainly contribute to my well-being, for instance because I know he will be better off if I do so than if I do not, but it does not make me particularly thrilled – that such an emotion would also be morally suspect is another matter, which I will not discuss here.

A subjective theory in which human flourishing does not have these hedonistic connotations is the informed desire theory. There are two aspects that are characteristic for this theory. The first is that people will flourish if they fulfil the desires that benefit their well-being. Which desires do so is not obvious and therefore, in contrast with the actual desire theory, the informed desire theory argues that people's flourishing is enhanced if they reflect on the desire and rank their desires in order of preference. The second characteristic is that the desires include longings that are not related to an appetitive state or whose fulfilment does not give psychological satisfaction (Griffin, 1986). We can, for instance, have an informed desire to be told the truth about our health instead of being ignorant about a lethal disease. By giving up the requirement of a person's positive experience and defining fulfilment in terms of the desire being realised instead of psychological fulfilment, the informed desire theory enlarges the classes of values that can be interpreted as desires.

An argument against the informed desire theory is that it seems to exclude the possibility that people flourish because something happens to them or is being done to them that they did not desire, but being actualised makes them aware that it does contribute to their flourishing. I think it is possible that situations or actions that happen to us without being desired have such qualities. We can be surprised by someone or by an activity. I know for instance of people who had an informed desire not to become parents, but when by accident conceived a child realised that this did contribute to their flourishing.

Thus, both the objective account and the subjective account have aspects that are necessary for human flourishing. This brings me to propose a theory that combines the two sides.

Human Flourishing as a Purposeful or Meaningful Life

A combined or mixed theory has both objective and person-related aspects. There are two aspects that are objective, namely (a) human

flourishing is itself perceived as an objective value, something that has worth in and of itself and (b) human flourishing is dependent on or requires particular goods and character, which we can objectively establish. The first aspect is not denied by subjective interpretations of human flourishing, in which it is also assumed that human flourishing is good in itself and not because it is desired. What defenders of subjective interpretations argue is that whether or not this is the case is based on the subjective interpretation of the person. Three remarks must be made about the goods that can be objectively established. First, human flourishing comprises several goods – I have already mentioned the goods of health, social relations, and safety, intellectual, creative and physical pursuits-; there is no overarching or dominant good or end that makes people flourish. Secondly, the goods should not be interpreted as being instrumental in the sense that their satisfaction is a means to human flourishing. In satisfying the goods, people actually flourish. In that sense, we can say, that flourishing is a type of what Elster (1981) calls ‘essentially by-products’. Similar to Elster’s argument that it is impossible to strive after happiness directly, one can only flourish through pursuing and satisfying the objective goods and will flourish by doing so. Thirdly, adopting the idea from the objective list theory that goods are characteristic for human beings does not imply that they are good for humans only or that they, as a cluster, describe what is distinct for human beings. Neither does the fact that the goods are good for all human beings, because they all share the same characteristics, mean that they are good for all in the same way. This brings us to the agent relative aspects, because people have different ways of pursuing the goods in order to flourish.

Flourishing requires that the person gives her own meaning to the objective goods or develops her own interpretation. The objectively identifiable goods are so general that they are in themselves not sufficient to assist a person to lead a flourishing life. The person herself has to construct her own interpretation of the goods. For instance, one of the objective goods is having relationships. However, the way in which one pursues this domain, for instance by having one exclusive relationship, several friendships and many acquaintances, and what kind of exclusive relationship contributes to one’s flourishing, is person dependent. Where one person flourishes by having a spiritual relationship with a deity, others thrive by having a long-term commitment to a person of the same or different gender and again others prosper by not having an exclusive relationship at all. Thus, although there are objectively identifiable goods, human flourishing is personal and diverse, because there are

many ways in which people can interpret and combine the diverse generic goods.

The basic criterion in this conception of human flourishing is 'purpose' or 'meaning': being able to give meaning to the objective goods makes it possible for people to flourish (see also de Ruyter, 2002). They must see the point of the pursuit of the goods and be able to identify with the way in which they are pursuing it. By giving their own interpretation of the abstract goods and pursuing this conception, people also have a meaning in life. 'Meaning' therefore operates in a twofold way: people give their own meaning or interpretation to the abstract goods and by doing so they are able to give meaning or sense to their life. As psychological research confirms (for instance Argyle, 2001; Baumeister, 1991; O'Connor and Chamberlain, 1996), people find meaning in life by doing and creating things and by engaging with others.

Having meaning in life is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for human flourishing, for circumstances in which a person lives might make it impossible for her to flourish even though she finds her life meaningful. It is also possible that a person values her conception of a generic good more than life itself, in which case it is possible to say that a person flourishes by putting her own life at risk for the good. Williams, for instance, argues that 'there is no contradiction in the idea of a man's dying for a ground project – quite the reverse, since if death really is necessary for the project, then to live would be to live with it unsatisfied, something which, if it really is his ground project, he has no reason to do' (1981, p. 13).¹

The notion of meaning is, I think, also a plausible interpretation of the requirement that a person acknowledges that she flourishes. For instance, Arneson objects to the idea that things only make a contribution to human flourishing if they are endorsed by the person, because he argues that a person's reasons might be weak, confused, or nonexistent (1999, p. 136). However, he draws the wrong conclusion, because he looks at the wrong things. He builds his case around Samantha who has written a brilliant poem, but denies its value because of her bad aesthetic theory. She does not think it is all that great and therefore does not perceive it to be contributing to her well-being. His argument focuses on the fact that she lacks the appropriate appreciation of the worth of her poem, but he does not take into account her evaluation of the activity as well as her own evaluation of the product. For, he assumes that she has worked on her poem with enthusiasm, that she spent a lot of time on it and took pleasure in the process and product. This means that her activity and its outcome had a purpose and were meaningful for her. Therefore,

I would argue that writing the poem contributed to her flourishing. I do acknowledge, and in that sense are not in complete disagreement with Arneson, that it is not unreasonable to presume that she would flourish more if she would have the appropriate appreciation of her poem. In this case, her justified feeling of pride of her accomplishment would have enhanced her flourishing.

To conclude, I believe that human flourishing consists of two aspects: generic goods that are objectively identifiable and the meaningful interpretation of these goods by the person herself. This is not a novel idea; Rasmussen (1999) defends a similar position, which he calls neo-Aristotelian. If we accept the idea that people have to give their own interpretation to the objectively identified goods, we presume that they do not blindly follow a particular path they cross or simply adopt the ideas of others; they do what they believe best or good within the defined domains. This requires not only that they are able to make such decisions independently and wisely, but also that they perceive themselves as being responsible for their own interpretation: they are the authors of their own conception. It does not exclude the possibility that people adopt the interpretation of others; there is no necessity for authenticity or originality. However, when they follow the interpretation of others, they do so for good reasons. Equally, it is perfectly possible for children to flourish within a framework they have adopted from their parents. It depends, however, whether or not they can share their parents' conception. For example, in Saudi Arabia girls are raised within an orthodox religious community but are given the opportunity to go to (a single sex) university. Some of them believe they will flourish by being a barrister instead of being a full-time mother. If the community does not allow them to pursue this career, there are ample reasons to presume that they will not flourish. Of course, if they believe that being a full-time mother is conducive to their well-being and do not wish to pursue a career or an independent life, this schism does not arise. What are the educational implications of this conception of human flourishing?

4. EDUCATION TOWARDS A FLOURISHING LIFE

There does not seem to be a lot of disagreement amongst philosophers about whether or not we can determine goods in or domains of life which, in principle, are beneficial for all human beings. The question is if these are good for everyone and can therefore be objectively determined as being conducive to human flourishing. In the former section I have taken a middle position, arguing that

although these goods are good for everyone, flourishing presupposes that people are able to live their life according to their own interpretation or purpose of the goods. This requires that people should become reflective actors or practically wise human beings: people need to be able to weigh the goods and give them an interpretation that is good for them now and later, taking into account external and internal factors, as well as be able to reflect about the ways in which their conception of the goods can be realised. Translating this into educational terms, I would argue that educators should pass on knowledge of the goods so that children understand what is conducive to human flourishing and should assist them to develop practical wisdom or reflective decision-making. Educators should be confident and modest: confident in their responsibility to educate children about the goods that are important for their flourishing and modest in their views about and attitudes against the ways they believe that people can pursue the goods and make them meaningful.

The first educational task is theoretically the least controversial, but not in practice. For, educating children about the generic goods that contribute to their flourishing, cannot merely consist of the transmission of knowledge about the goods, but also requires examples of diverse ways in which these domains are interpreted by people as well as educators who foster these goods. The first can clearly be contentious, because interpretations can be opposite and not all educators are willing to inform children about ways of life they do not agree with. But, the requirement that educators foster the goods is not unproblematic either. For instance, what are the implications of suggesting that educators exemplify a generic good like health? Does it mean that educators are not allowed to smoke? How often can they take their children to McDonald's (if at all)? Do parents need to exercise frequently?

The good of having relationships with others seems to be the conclusive argument for the importance of moral education. For does not being moral give one the best chances of maintaining relationships with others? I think it does, but the flourishing mother and spouse who is active in a racist organisation in which she flourishes is a challenging counter example. As long as she does not do anything illegal, which would separate her from her children and husband, she can flourish in the relationships within her confined group. I think we have to accept this exception, which does not prevent us from trying to convince her that it is morally wrong wanting to deny other people the same opportunities as she has and that a society without racial hatred will be a more prosperous

and thriving one, which will be conducive for her own flourishing as well.

Secondly, educators should assist children to become practically wise people who can ‘deliberate finely about what is good and beneficial for himself, not about some restricted area – e.g. about what promotes health or strength – but what promotes living well in general’ (Aristotle, 1140a, 25–30). To be able to do so, Aristotle argues, we need virtue. For the development of virtue as well as defining one’s own interpretation of good, children need experience and guidance: they need experience to become able deliberators on what is virtuous, i.e. the mean between a deficient or excessive interpretation of a particular good which serves both themselves and others, and they need their own experience to assist them in deciding how they wish to pursue good. This is something that educators cannot give to children directly, but they can give children information and advice and most important they can give children freedom of exploration. Educators have a more direct role in cultivating the capacities to deliberate by passing on knowledge, assisting children to think and reflect, and foremost by being an example to the children and by offering other exemplars.

Practical wisdom is not only an educational aim, but also something that educators themselves need in order to be an example for the children and to assist children in developing plans that can contribute to realising the interpretation of the good they believe to be meaningful in the future. However, children should also learn that:

- a) They will not flourish by fulfilling one good only; neglecting all other goods will undermine their flourishing (although some can be at times less important than at others). This means that even though the development of some talents requires that children need to spend a lot of time and energy in developing particular capacities and dispositions, other goods like friendship and development of dispositions like intellectual curiosity or friendliness should not be neglected. I do not believe that the education of children should be completely balanced in the sense that it addresses all goods equally, but neglecting goods in the education of children might undermine the child’s chances of flourishing in the future.
- b) Their interpretations of the goods and their conception of what provides meaning can change or might require a change. The fact that one flourishes in the pursuit of a particular ideal or job, does not mean that these sources cannot become meaningless. The dramatic changes in the lives of Saul, John Stuart Mill and

Henri Nouwen, but also changes people need to make if they discover that certain options are not open to them, show that people should have a certain flexibility and openness in order to be able to deal with meaning-changing situations.

- c) They need will-power to pursue their goods because their achievement can be difficult and demanding at times (see for instance MacIntyre, 1981, p. 204). Leading a flourishing life is not necessarily easy or pleasurable all the time.

Finally, the development of a meaningful interpretation of the goods or domains takes place in a social environment, which is a source of and a corrective for developing a meaningful interpretation. There are several aspects to this social influence. First, paraphrasing Taylor (1992), I want to argue that meaning takes on importance against a background of horizons, which is a metaphor for the ideas and ideals of a society or community as to what is to count as important or significant. Of course, this does not entail uncritical adoption of these values, because this would contradict the importance of self-direction. Secondly, societies determine the limits of interpretations one can legitimately give. For example, where Mormons believe it is justified for a man to marry several women and some men and women might find this a meaningful interpretation of their long-term relationship, the US law forbids polygamy. Therefore, wise parents will pass on to their children that this is not an interpretation that will lead to their flourishing. They might enthuse or enthusiastically support their children in trying to having laws changed. Laws are not unchangeable or incorrigible. An obvious example within the same domain is of course the fact that gay marriage is no longer illegal in many European countries. However, until such is the case, people can thrive by pursuing the change in law, but normally will find it almost impossible to do so by living unlawfully. Third, the fact that society and community influences one's interpretation does not imply a moral relativist account of flourishing. It is possible to say that one person's way of flourishing is better than another one. For instance, people who flourish by caring for others lead a better life than people who flourish by abusing others. Neither does it imply a prudent relativist account of flourishing. If a person believes she flourishes by starving herself to a desired skeleton figure, we have good reasons to question her conception of the goods of social relations and self-esteem. As Raz maintains, 'The social dependence of value has nothing to do with the affirmation of social practices as reasons for their own validity. [...] They are necessary for the existence of values. But they are not their justification' (1999, p. 210; see also Raz, 2003).

The education described makes it possible that children will lead a flourishing life; it does not guarantee their flourishing. This is evidently impossible, because the future cannot be foreseen and life cannot be controlled. Parents and teachers can and should do what they can to make it as likely as possible that their children will flourish. However, the proposal affirms the educational view that parents should gradually decrease their paternalistic stance toward their children and assist children to develop their own interpretation of the goods. If humans only flourish if they can subscribe to the meaning they believe is right, paternalism cannot enhance human flourishing, because it infringes a person's self-determination. Equally, it implies that educators should not prevent their children from having 'an open future', because educators do not know which life will be meaningful to children. For instance, parents should not proscribe which kind of relationship children must have as an adult, what kind of job they should pursue or which kind of religion (if at all) children should adhere to, because they do not know which of the possibilities will in fact be meaningful for their children. They can only convey that these goods are important for the children now and as adults later and assist children to be able to make them contribute to their flourishing. Of course this does not prohibit parents from sharing their own conception with the children. It would not even be possible not to do so, given the right of parents to pursue a life they believe conducive to their own flourishing. It 'only' claims that their educational responsibility to assist children to be able to live a flourishing life requires that they allow their children to discover for themselves what will make their life as flourishing.

5. NOTE

- ¹ Williams' notion of ground project is comparable to Frankfurt's concept of ideals (1999). A ground project or a set of projects encompass a person's deepest commitments, things about which the person cares so much that she has to act according to these projects or ideals. A ground project, therefore, has a profound influence on one's identity or one's self-description and gives meaning to a person's life (Frankfurt, 1999, p. 112–115; Williams, 1981, p. 12).

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