



## **An Objective Account of Individual Flourishing**

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## 1. Introduction

The question what it means for people to ‘flourish’ has recently been subject of debate in different academic fields. The notion of flourishing was originally taken up as an important notion by philosophers in the 1980s (Ackrill, 1980; McDowell, 1980) and has more recently been studied by philosophers (Snow; 2008; Tiberius, 2006; Haybron, 2008) and philosophers of education (Brighouse, 2006; White, 2011; de Ruyter, 2004; 2015; Kristjánsson, 2020). Over the last twenty years, psychologists, economists, and educationalists have become increasingly interested in the notion too.

‘Flourishing’ is commonly used as a translation of the Greek concept of *eudaimonia*, which is sometimes also translated as ‘happiness’, ‘well-being’ and even as ‘mental health’ (Keyes, 2010). Originally, *eudaimonia* was the name of the highest good of human endeavours and that toward which all actions aim. In Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (1985) argued that *eudaimonia* consisted in the activity of the rational part of the soul in accordance with virtue, over a complete life. Today, there is a variety of accounts of flourishing, some of which are Aristotelian and eudaimonistic while others are not.

In this paper, we examine an issue that has in our view received insufficient explicit attention in the (Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian) literature on flourishing. This issue has to do with the way in which authors have understood the *agent* that is being evaluated as flourishing more or less. Recall that Aristotle’s ideas about the flourishing agent were informed by the so-called function argument, according to which everything in the universe, including human beings, have a natural function (*ergon*). When human beings excel in ‘being humane’, which Aristotle took to be functioning as rational and political animals, this is expressed in a variety of moral and intellectual virtues. So, Aristotle was interested in species-specific flourishing, which depended on a teleological account of human nature that individuals have in common.

Several virtue ethicists have (implicitly or explicitly) understood the flourishing agent in a similar way. In her book *Natural Goodness* (2001), Phillipa Foot takes a naturalistic

perspective and evaluates the agent primarily *qua living creature*, more specifically as a member of the human species. Other authors, however, have understood the agent rather differently. Christine Swanton (2003, 2007) is an example of a group of authors who adopt more of a social-historical perspective and evaluates the agent primarily *qua role occupier* in an institution, or practitioner in a social practice (MacIntyre, 2003). What both groups have in common is that they insufficiently recognise that people can also be said to flourish *qua* individual. This is unfortunate, as it may be argued that each individual may be faced with the question: is it good *for me* that the goods of a particular role or of being a human being have a place in my life? (MacIntyre, 1999, pp. 66). Another way of formulating the problem is that contemporary ethicists have tended to treat first-person questions such as ‘*Who* am I?’ and ‘How should *I* live’ as ‘*What* am I’, for example a human being or a role occupier. We assume that in order to understand flourishing, we need to understand individual selfhood better, i.e. the nature of the being who is enquiring into itself (Atkins, 2019).

Exploring this question is not an easy task. Virtue ethicist usually determine whether an someone flourishes by checking whether she shares certain characteristics that a particular *group* (a species, a profession) needs in order to flourish in a particular environment. Flourishing entails more than having such characteristics, but flourishing seems to be always in virtue of possession such characteristics (MacIntyre, 1999, p. 65). Following this line of argument, it becomes unclear whether it makes sense at all to talk about the ‘flourishing of individuals *qua* individuals’. The criteria for individual flourishing may become so subjective, that it becomes impossible to come up with any general answer. Or are there objective criteria after all?

After we have discussed the work of Foot (2001) and Swanton (2003), we will look for objective criteria for individual flourishing by drawing on the works of several authors who have not developed accounts of flourishing but work in related fields, such as Kekes (2002), Cottingham (2010) and Ricoeur (1991). In the third and final section, we will formulate the insights we arrived at and offer a short reflection on the implications this discussion may have for educating for flourishing in schools.

## **2. Flourishing as a human being or role occupier**

In this section, we examine two objective accounts of flourishing and show that they have difficulties making sense of what it means to flourish *qua* individual. However, we should start

by saying a little more on what it means for theories of flourishing to be ‘objective’. Whether accounts are subjective or objective has to do with the question which criteria are used for determining whether someone flourishes. On subjective accounts, it is the individual who determines whether she flourishes or not. Their own ‘inner’ experiences with, feelings and beliefs about their flourishing is what give people ‘the last word’ on their flourishing. On objective accounts, this is determined by consulting ‘facts’ about someone’s life that can be determined by others (Kristjánsson, 2020, ch. 3). For example, Aristotelians argue that flourishing is a way of living that consists in acting in a virtuous way. Happiness is only ‘deep’, Foot (2001, p. 88) argues, when we are happy about certain objects, “things that are basic in human life such as home, and family, and work, and friendship”. Many accounts, including Foot’s (2001) and Kristjánsson’s (2020), offer a combination of subjective and objective elements.

Foot develops an account of flourishing in her book *Natural Goodness*, and we need to understand the argument she develops in the book better in order to understand her account. Foot offers a philosophical account of moral judgement that differs from non-cognitivist theories that originate in Hume and became popular in post-war analytic philosophy. Philosophers of language such as Ayer and Stevenson argued that moral evaluations (e.g. ‘That was very honest of you’) express a speaker’s feelings and attitudes, which motivate an audience to have similar feelings. In their view, moral evaluations do *not* express (true or false) knowledge about people acting in a particular way. Foot argues that this kind of subjectivism amounted to an undesirable gap between moral judgements (about values) on the one hand and assertions (about facts) on the other. She believes that someone who utters a moral judgement has reasons to act, and she wants *anyone* to have such motivating reasons by basing them on certain “facts about human life” (Foot, 2001, p. 24). In this way, she tries to close the fact-value distinction.

In Foot’s view, evaluating human beings in a moral sense shares a ‘basic logical structure’ with evaluating (parts of) plants and animals. Plants and animals have, as Foot (2001, pp. 26-27) calls it, a ‘natural’ (also ‘intrinsic’ or ‘autonomous’) goodness, which is how well an individual living creature relates to the ‘lifeform’ of the species, the most general features of how creatures of this kind live. A living thing is evaluated as ‘good’ if it contributes to its defence and rearing the young, which contributes to the development, survival and reproduction of its species in a particular habitat (Foot, 2001, p. 33). In Foot’s view, a deer without swiftness, a bee without

a sting, and an owl without night vision cannot be called 'good'. Note that in these cases, an individual can be evaluated as good or bad without it being conscious of it. For example, by showing its colourful tail, a male peacock is engaging in good behaviour, whether it knows is or not.

As Foot's most interesting and controversial claim we take the idea that *moral* goodness of human actions and character traits has a similar structure as the evaluations of the natural goodness of plants and animals. What they have in common is that all living things have functions and purposes and can therefore be explained in a teleological way (Foot, 2001, p. 40). There are also differences between humans and other animals. Human beings are rational creatures that can comprehend an end *as an end* and act for reasons. Foot acknowledges that individuals may simply not care about being a good human being. Nevertheless, she argues that virtues are the things that make a life good for *any* human being. Without virtues such as loyalty, fairness, kindness, the human lifeform, which includes experiencing love, maintaining friendships and making promises, becomes impossible. Foot understands flourishing as 'deep happiness', which is not just a state of mind, but a kind of happiness that comes from doing certain things that mark a grown-up human life. Happiness, in short, consists in "the enjoyment of good things" (Foot, 2001, p. 97).

A second objective account of flourishing is Swanton's (2003) non-Aristotelian and non-eudemonistic version of virtue ethics. What makes her view pluralistic is five things, one of which is the idea that the bases of moral response or acknowledgement are pluralistic, including values (consequentialism), status (Kantianism) and relationships (care ethics). In Swanton's (2003) view, there is some truth in all these ethical views, which rules out the Aristotelian view that "*the* rationale of *all* the virtues" is their being needed for the flourishing of an agent (p. 3). She defines virtues as "dispositions to respond to or acknowledge, in an excellent (or good enough) way, items in the field of a virtue" (2003, p. 1). Virtues enable people to deal in an excellent way with what she calls 'demands of the world'. This may make the life of a virtuous person admirable in the eyes of others, but it does not entail that virtues are good for agents.

What makes a life flourishing is, on Swanton's account, that a life is good *for* the agent, which she, in turn, interprets as a life that offers the agent personal satisfaction. There are cases in which people can be said to personally flourish without being virtuous. Moreover, there seem to be people who exercise the virtues, but in a way that is detrimental to their flourishing. So,

Swanton disagrees with a eudaemonist like Foot that virtues are a necessary condition for flourishing. Yet, she does not rule out that virtues sometimes contribute to flourishing. In fact, she argues that most virtues are not damaging to personal flourishing as long as ‘self-love’ is part of the profile of all the virtues (Swanton, 2003, p. 81). Virtue contributes to flourishing if moral considerations are integrated in what gives someone personal satisfaction, or, in other words, derive pleasure from being virtuous.

When evaluating whether agents flourish or not, Swanton gives less precedence to the agent *qua human being* than Foot does. In Swanton’s (2007) view, understanding people as human beings does not tell us that much about what it means for individuals to live or act well. Instead, she turns to roles, such as being a teacher or business person, for more specific requirements. Goods realised in roles and virtues necessary for functioning well in these roles must themselves be worthwhile and valuable. This means that they have a function within an institution in which a role is embedded, instead of being instrumentally valuable, i.e. to the extent that they contribute to goodness as human being. However, Swanton does *not* think that notions about human nature and human flourishing are completely irrelevant in answering questions about what is virtuous in a particular role. Compared to the strong naturalism of Foot and Hursthouse, Swanton (2003) supports a weak naturalism, which means that her role ethics assumes a “‘background’ theory of human psychology and development” (p. 60), which puts some constraint on our theories about the virtues. There are many ways in which people may respond to items in a domain relevant to a virtue, but not all of these ways can be called ‘human’.

We conclude that Foot’s and Swanton’s accounts of flourishing differ in many respects: Foot’s virtue ethics is Aristotelian, naturalistic, teleological and eudemonistic while Swanton’s virtue ethics is not. However, on closer inspection, it seems that they also have some things in common. First of all, Swanton does appeal to a notion of human nature in her account of the virtues. Moreover, she does think that there is a place for teleology, albeit not in nature, but within roles and institutions. Furthermore, Swanton does think that being virtuous is often, but not necessarily, conducive to an agent’s flourishing. On the other hand, Foot (2001, p. 38, 43) recognises that there is a diversity of human beings and human cultures, while her work only offers species-based criteria for flourishing. In addition, Foot (2001, p. 115) acknowledges that specific roles sometimes justify actions that are generally considered wrong on her naturalistic account. Finally, Foot and Swanton both defend an *objective* account of flourishing. In

determining whether someone flourishes, they turn to criteria derived from descriptions of the human lifeform, or roles within organisational contexts. Yet, both acknowledge that in an objective, moral account of flourishing there should be a place for elements that are meaningful for individuals, i.e. people should be able to integrate moral considerations in their personal life – it should give *them* personal satisfaction and become a reason *for them* to act.

### **3. Objective criteria of individual flourishing**

The third interpretation of the agent is that of the human being as an individual. Theories that take this perspective presume that while human beings may be similar in many respects, they also have particular characteristics and are uniquely situated. It seems that in an important sense, the question what it means for individuals to flourish can only be answered from a first-person perspective. So, individuals' answers to the question 'what is a good life for me?' will vary. Dennis, for instance, says that for him a good life is to be healthy, to be successful in his job, being married to the love of his life and having six children, while Joyce believes it is to dedicate her life to improving the climate by living CO<sub>2</sub>-neutral, demonstrating and giving lectures about climate change in local schools. However, while Dennis and Joyce give *personal* answers, the evaluation of whether their answers are a description of a flourishing life is not necessarily *subjective*. In other words, examining the flourishing of individuals does not necessarily mean that we take it as sufficient that the person believes she is flourishing.

This raises the question what objective criteria there may be to evaluate people's personal answers to the question what makes their life flourishing. In this section, we will discuss two objective criteria for individual flourishing by drawing on the works of several authors who are not strictly virtue ethicists or have not written explicitly about flourishing but have written about the 'good life' and the 'art of living'. We will first discuss the idea that an individual only lives a good life if it is *unified*, after which will examine the notion that that a life has to be *moral* in order to be good.

#### *Unity*

Different authors use different words for a unified life, which denote particular interpretations of unity and thus also what the author believes to be characteristic of a flourishing life, namely 'consistency', 'congruity', 'continuity', 'coherence' and 'integrity'. Although we realise that

there are various interpretations of these terms (Kristjánsson, 2019), we understand ‘continuity’ as referring to unity over time, ‘consistency’ to unity in a variety of situations or practices in which a person participates, while ‘coherence’ or ‘congruence’ refers to a clustering of actions, ideals, dispositions, emotions into a sensible, harmonious whole. In academic circles, the term ‘integrity’ is sometimes used interchangeably with coherence, consistency or cohesion (e.g. Cottingham, 2010), but it is also used in a way that aligns more with common usage, namely that integrity is a virtue, closely related to honesty or having strong moral principles. To this we return later in this section. First, three examples are presented that use different terms for a unified life, namely ‘style’ (Kekes, 2002), ‘shape’ (Cottingham, 2010) and ‘narrative identity’ (Ricoeur, 1992).

Although Kekes (2002) maintains that an integrated life is neither necessary nor sufficient for all good lives, in his book *The Art of Life* he defends the view that individuals live a good life when they live up to their personal excellence; when there is congruity between the beliefs, emotions and motives that form the individual’s dominant attitude (see e.g. Kekes, 2002, pp. 196-197). Congruity is expressed by an individual’s consistent pursuit over time of personal excellences in projects in which the individual is engaged, e.g. going to school, having a job, building a family, etc. This is what he calls *the style of the individual*. Throughout his book, Kekes (2002, p. 172) mentions three aspects of style: it is not connected with any specifiable action, but influences various actions, it requires transforming one’s character to approximate one’s ideals of personal excellence, and it is expressed in a lasting pattern of activity, so it expresses the person’s dominant attitude, which is comparable to Frankfurt’s (1999) idea of ideals necessitating the will of an individual. Style concerns “the roots of a person’s motivation: what it is that that person values above everything, for the sake of which everything is done, as well as what is unthinkable, psychologically impossible for that person” (Kekes, 2002, p. 190). Thus, in Kekes’ terms, the answer to the question what the good life is to the person herself, is: ‘my life is good if the way in which I act in various projects reflects the personal excellence(s) I most value and if I am able to maintain this way of living throughout my entire life’. In Kekes’ idea of style, an individual’s ideals and personal excellences regulate the coherence and consistency of a person’s life. They are both the lens as well as the compass for the individual.

A somewhat different perspective is presented by Cottingham (2010), who begins with the idea that people have different and often conflicting desires and aims and that they are more



or less conscious of these. He suggests that it is in people's interest, or that it is better (in objective terms), if individuals are aware of these desires and aim and able to integrate them into their life plan, because an integrated life is more stable than a compartmentalised life. An integrated life means that the individual does not suffer (or suffers less) from conflicts in desires and aims. Moreover, such a person does not get "along all right *by accident*" or by chance (Cottingham, 2010, p. 5). A person of integrity possesses "a certain psychological wholeness – an understanding of the significance of all her various goals and desires, and the true place of each in her overall life-plan – how they fit in with her sense of who she really is" (2010, p. 8). The way in which they construct this wholeness is what he calls giving *the shape to a life*, the content of which differs for every individual for they have their own goals and desires. In Cottingham's terms, the answer to the question what the good life is to the person herself: 'my life is good if I know my (deepest) desires and aspirations and when I am able to fulfil them by following my life plan'. Knowing oneself is therefore a necessary condition in Cottingham's view. It is not sufficient, however, as we will discuss later on.

That consistency, coherence or congruity over time and between one's values and aspirations are a criterion for an individual's flourishing is not surprising. It seems to be a logical condition to be able to make sense of an 'individual' in the first place. To identify someone as an individual, there needs to be 'an object' that we can describe and for this we need characteristics that are enduring and recognisable in various situations. This is a (psycho)logical necessity for the individual herself too: to be able to think of oneself as a 'me', the individual needs to be able to characterise herself over time and across the roles she has. Another psychological reason is, in line with Cottingham, that without integrity, the individual would be led by external influences or incidental desires only, which prevent the individual from leading her own life – although we immediately want to note that individuals cannot completely determine their own lives. Thirdly, integrity is regarded as helpful for a moral person. This argument can be found in theories on (the importance of developing a) moral identity (Blasi, 1980; Aquino & Reed, 2002). Archer (2017) summarises it well when he writes that an integrated self will "reduce the risk of the all too common conflict between morality and self-interest" (p. 436).

A third way to describe a unified life is derived from the work of Paul Ricoeur, to whom we cannot do complete justice in this paper, because of the unusual breadth of his work. In *Oneself as another* (1990), he deals with two interpretations of 'identity'. First of all, he

understands identity in terms of selfhood (*ipse*-identity), which he also calls the ‘who’ of identity. Secondly, he understand it as sameness (or *idem*-identity), which denotes the ‘what’ of identity. In their daily lives, people experience the *idem* and *ipse* aspects of their personal identity most of the time as overlapping. However, these interpretations do not necessarily coincide, for people can change and with this their identity changes, but they are still the same self. ‘Narrative identity’, in his view, forms the bridge or the relation between the self and the same. For this, Ricoeur (1991, p. 143) draws on the ideas on the ‘plot’ that Aristotle (2012) developed in the *Poetics*. People make sense of their lives and who and what they are by drawing up a story for themselves or others about their lives in previous times, the roles or positions they have in their lives and the practices in which they participate as well as the values that guide them, and the plans and ideals about the future.

Ricoeur (1990, pp. 122-3) calls the *ipse*-aspect of identity also ‘character’, a collection of acquired habits and identifications. While character expresses identity-understood-as-sameness, Ricoeur does not see character as something completely detached from identity-as-selfhood. Someone’s character is related to his selfhood as being the “‘what’ of the ‘who’” (Ricoeur, 1990, p. 122). Someone’s character is not something that speaks for itself, but is a ‘stable pole’ that can only be understood as part of a hermeneutical process; characters are themselves plots. So, a character is both the protagonist in the story and the one who draws up the story. Drawing up a story (and, one’s life, as a narrative construction) is what Ricoeur calls ‘emplotment’, a dynamic story that structures different elements in such a way that it results in rounded whole. In other words, emplotting one’s life means that heterogeneous, discordant elements are synthesised into a meaningful whole. The plot mediates between the separate and disparate elements of a person’s life, both in time as well between events that happen and actions of a person. The narrative composition thereby has the characteristic of ‘discordant concordance’ (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 142): the synthesis of the heterogeneous, which is not overcome, but given place in the plot.

Thus, two types of coherence or consistency in place and time are suggested as being characteristic of a flourishing person, namely coherence in the way in which one acts in diverse practices and coherence between one’s ideals to be a particular type of person and the way in which one acts. That these characteristics are challenged in real life by events and encounters should not be overlooked, which is precisely the reason for Ricoeur to develop his notion of narrative identity.

## *Morality*

As promised before, we return to the question if and how unity and morality are related as conditions for individual flourishing. Until now, we discussed the ideas about coherence, integrity etc. as in principle detachable from moral questions, but the authors do not take non-moral unity to be sufficient for a good life. We follow Williams' (1993) distinction between a broader conception of 'ethics' and a narrow conception of 'morality'. In this sense, 'ethics' has to do with the (aretaic) question how individual people can live a meaningful and flourishing life, while 'morality' has to do with the (deontic) rules and obligations that a system must minimally meet in order to be just. This distinction enable us to make clear that we do not address the much-debated question whether being virtuous is necessary for one's flourishing, but whether meeting certain moral obligations towards others is necessary for an agent's own flourishing.

The authors discussed in this section all subscribe to the idea that we can only evaluate someone's life as 'flourishing' if it meets certain moral criteria. For instance, Ricoeur places his narrative theory at the crossroads of the theory of action and moral theory and proposes that his theory primarily aims at the good life (ethics has primacy over morality), but that the ethical aim has "to pass through the sieve of the norm" (p. 170). Ricoeur (1990, p. 172) concludes that human life has an ethical aim, i.e. "*aiming the 'good life' with and for others, in just institutions*" (italics by author). In addition, Kekes (2002, p. 249) argues that good lives should not only focus on personal satisfaction, but also meet certain moral requirements, which can be universal, social and individual (i.e. related to obligations against all, the moral rules of a society and personal moral rules). Note however, that Kekes (2002, p. 173) suggests that what he calls deplorable people, like Göring or Napoleon, can also have style. So, style can be (and ideally is) moral, but this is not necessarily so. Furthermore, Cottingham sees the wholehearted pursuit of one's chosen projects as necessary but not sufficient for flourishing. A person's life should also be led by objective goodness, i.e. a life "directed towards a good and a virtuous way of living" (2010, p. 13).

Our modest aim here is to introduce a distinction between three ways of acting immorally, which helps to evaluate the possible necessity of morality for flourishing. In the first category we find individuals who have a conception of the good life that is inherently immoral. For example, we assume that Hitler, Mao and other dictators sincerely believed that killing

millions of people is part of what it means for them and others to lead a flourishing life. In Ricoeur's terms, we can say that they have an ethical aim that has not 'passed through the sieve' of the moral norm. It is a view of the good life that is immoral since it damages a (large group of) people or does not respect their rights. Individuals with such a worldview can bring out the best of themselves, act consistently and coherently within various practices and there can be consistency between their ideals and their actions. Yet, precisely because they pursue a worldview that intentionally aims to undermine the well-being or disrespect the dignity of other human beings, we cannot call them 'flourishing' individuals.

In the second category we find interesting cases where people have to act immorally to be able live a flourishing life. Conly (1988) suggests that it is possible to give examples of people who can be said to be flourishing according to our common linguistic intuitions as well as accepted theories of flourishing, but who do not act morally or even immoral in some respects. She regards Lorenzo de Medici as an example of a flourishing person as he was a great politician, patron of the arts and extremely creative himself, but he was also unjust. As Conly (1988, p. 92) writes "Yet, while incontrovertibly unjust, he seems certainly to have flourished, Indeed, not only did Lorenzo flourish while unjust, it looks as though just character and just behaviour would have prevented him from flourishing. One simply could not become ruler of Florence with a strict regard for the rights of others.". Examples such as these, we suggest, need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. The general rule of thumb, in our view, should however be that the immoral act is necessary for a greater *moral* good and that the act should be incidental rather than continuous or systematic.

The third category consists of people who flourish in one domain while acting immorally in another. We can think of people who are good to others, for instance by doing a lot of voluntary work for a community or other citizens, but whose worldview is discriminatory. Here we can imagine a deeply religious house wife who looks after elderly in her neighbourhood and organises events for deprived children in other areas of the city in which she lives, but only for people of her own ethnicity or race. She abhors the idea of having to interact with ethnic minorities or black people as these people are inferior according to her worldview. Yet, opposite examples can be given as well. People may be fully engrossed in a practice that is good to many people (e.g. science, moral activism), but neglect the ones close by or their own well-being. Some adults may be so dedicated to their work or activism that they do not have time for their

children or spouse. They might say that they are living a flourishing life, because they act consistently with their personal ideals of being a wise scholar or a moral authority (even if they do will not put it like this), but they do this to the detriment of people who are dependent on them.

While we advocate a ‘moralised’ account of flourishing, according to which an agent has to meet certain obligations towards others before we can call his life flourishing, the examples in the last two categories make clear that it is possible to detach flourishing from morality by introducing roles or domains. The downside of these options is, however, that this detachment makes it difficult for individuals to meet the first criterion of individual flourishing discussed in this section, i.e. unity. Unity and morality seems to be communicating vessels: the benefit of demoralizing flourishing comes at the cost of compartmentalising one’s self, unless, of course, the person has a thoroughly immoral conception of the good life as we discussed under the first category. Finally, we should note that it is also possible to live a morally *indifferent* life, a life in which the individual is focused on for instance economic or aesthetic values. In this case, we would argue that as long as individuals do not intentionally harm others in their pursuit, they can be said to live a flourishing life, albeit not optimally. People do not have to have moral aims at the top of their conception of the good life in order to flourish (see also Schinkel & De Ruyter, 2017).

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this paper, we have examined how we can understand the agent who is evaluated as more or less flourishing. First, we looked at the work of Foot and Swanton, who understand the agent primarily as a human being or as a role occupier. Our point has been that these (and arguably many more authors) insufficiently recognise that agents can also be seen as individuals who are looking for an answer what a flourishing life means to them. We do not claim this critique to be new. For example, more than forty-five years ago, Ackrill (1973) already noted that Aristotle’s account of human nature and flourishing is very general, and he argued that these notions only put some limits on the possible answers to the question how one should live. While we agree with Russell (2012, p. 8) that flourishing has to do with the fulfilment as humans, and not *just* as individuals, we do think that theories of flourishing should make more space for a discussion of how individuals can specify this human nature in a diversity of ways. In the paper, we showed

that such personal answers do not have to be subjective by discussing two criteria - unity and morality - which we derived from the work of Cottingham, Kekes and Ricoeur, authors who are at a distance from the (virtue ethical) discussion about flourishing, but offered valuable insights. An interesting question for future research would be how to make sense of the relationship between the different interpretations of the agent that we discussed. While we argued that it matters to take the individual perspective seriously, it is still an open question what diversity of interpretations of individual flourishing one should allow for, and whether these can also be at odds with the naturalistic and practice-related criteria for flourishing.

While the educational implications of individual flourishing require a separate paper, we will touch upon one important educational implication, which will become clearer after we have briefly introduced Kristjánsson's (2020) latest work on flourishing as the aim of education. His (overall Aristotelian) view on flourishing is most in line with Foot's work that we discussed in Section 2. Kristjánsson is interested in *human* flourishing, which he takes to be the "intrinsically desirable, ultimate end of human beings" which involves virtuous activity "suitable and peculiar to human beings" (p. 9). Moreover, he expounds a species specific view of human nature, which he takes to be rational, moral, emotional and social. He acknowledges that his book is more about what people have in common than about what sets them apart. In addition, he takes, as a philosopher, seriously whatever empirical evidence there is available about the "deep structural features of Homo sapiens" (p. 5). Finally, with regard to the role of education, he argues that its task should be to help individuals to become the "best specimen of one's species that one can possibly be" (p. 4). That said, Kristjánsson does also argue that someone can only flourish if her life is experienced as purposeful, and he sometimes describes agents as "persons", i.e. beings who have different projects and face different challenges. Still, pluralism of a neo-Aristotelian kind is in Kristjánsson's view "a principle of unity, not of fragmentation" (2020, p. 171).

Kristjánsson argues that education can only aim for the flourishing of students if schools are institutions that provide optimal conditions for teachers and students to thrive, and if teachers contribute to students' flourishing directly through being an exemplar of flourishing.

Kristjánsson (2020, p. 188) admits that the role as a facilitator of flourishing (in the sense described above) will not be an easy task for many teachers, because they are generally not well-prepared to pay intentional and structural attention to moral and identity issues in education, not in the last place because most teacher education institutes pay little attention to the moral aspects

of teaching. A corollary of our view is, first of all, that what it means to be an exemplar of flourishing will need to be reconsidered, so that it includes an idea of how teachers can also be an exemplar of *individual* flourishing to students. Moreover, fostering the flourishing of students implies that teachers aim to do what constitutes flourishing for *individual students*, which requires that teachers are sensitive to the uniqueness of all students. This means that they take into account the particularities of the student, the context of situations in which they interact with the student and their own character and values. Yet, if teachers already have difficulties to stimulate students to flourish as people who have something in common with fellow-students, i.e. their being a human being or (future) occupier of roles, we expect even more difficulties to arise if we accept, following Rasmussen (1999, p. 6) that individualising flourishing implies that “no two cases of human flourishing are the same”. It raises the question to what extent teachers can reasonably be expected to have an eye for children’s individual flourishing in the current education system. Nevertheless, our suggestion is to connect the philosophical literature on flourishing in education to pedagogical literature, which has – particularly in the phenomenological work of Van Manen (1991, 2015) – much to offer about how teachers can be ‘tactfully sensitive’ towards children’s subjectivity even in large groups.

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