What About Compassion?

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Introduction

Two years ago, at the previous INPE conference in Cosenza, Italy, I presented my first paper on human flourishing as an ideal aim of education. The concept of human flourishing in itself can be described as the ideal of an optimal life (De Ruyter 2012). ‘Education’ mostly refers to formal schooling and the content of the curriculum in this context. For example Harry Brighouse argues that ‘[t]he school should see itself as having an obligation to facilitate the long-term flourishing of the children’ (2006, 42). And John White argues in his 2011 book Exploring well-being in schools that ‘schools should be mainly about equipping people to lead a fulfilling life’ (2011, introduction). However, White suggests that parents should try to contribute to increasing the chances of a flourishing life for their children as well, as he writes that ‘good parents have their children’s flourishing at heart’ (White 2011, 3).

The paper proposed two formal criteria for the concept of human flourishing; 1) flourishing is intrinsically worthwhile; and 2) flourishing means the actualisation of one’s potential. Furthermore, the second criterion had three subcriteria; 2a) to be able to say that someone is flourishing or has flourished, one has to look at her life as a whole; 2b) flourishing is a dynamic state; and 2c) there are objective goods; things that are good for everybody (see Wolbert, De Ruyter and Schinkel 2015). We wrote that ‘flourishing is characterised by ongoing development, striving and effort to sustain it. (..) Flourishing appeals to a strong intuition of educators to want for children that ‘they make something out of their life’ (2015, p. 127).

During my presentation there was critique on the individualistic, competitive, approach to ‘the good life’ that the discourse of flourishing was perceived to have by those commentators. This academic year, when I was tutoring bachelor students in Pedagogical Sciences at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the same individualistic approach emerged. Students were asked to search for a picture of a flourishing person. The ‘winning’ picture was a picture of a man winning a marathon. Flourishing, according to my students, was about individual accomplishments, this marathon runner had done something special; a successful, personal, achievement.

The Dutch (influential) educational researcher Micha de Winter (2004) argues that in contemporary aims of education (such as flourishing) the emphasis is on the individual, whereas ‘the common good’ is
missing. Christine Doddington, during that first presentation two years ago, asked me the question: “what about compassion?” What about the other person, when the ‘I’ is striving for a flourishing life?

The question of this work-in-progress paper is whether it is true what De Winter suggests; is flourishing, striving for it as well as living a flourishing life, primarily aimed at the individual good? And moreover, can there be, within the confines of the concept of human flourishing, no attention for ‘the common good’, or for the goods of the other person? What about compassion? What is the relation between flourishing and compassion? As it is work-in-progress I will not be able to provide answers here. I will try to make a start by clarifying the concepts of ‘the common good’ (as De Winter uses it), and ‘compassion’.

Last but not least, as an example of a situation where compassion can be an important factor, there is the current flood of immigrants coming to Europe, and the lack of compassion European policy and many protest groups seem to have towards those immigrants. Is it because ‘I’ aim for a flourishing life that I don’t need to have compassion with those other people, also human beings, inhabitants of the same world as ‘I’ do, or is it so that a flourishing life actually requires compassion with the other, in the sense that ‘human flourishing is [only] achieved with and among others’ (Rasmussen 1999, p. 13, emphasis added), so that because I strive for a flourishing life, I ought to care for the other and have compassion? And then, which others? These last questions are meant to evoke discussion, and will not be further elaborated here. However, I do hope to provide enough guidance with this paper to contribute to a fruitful discussion.

The Common Good as an Aim of Education

De Winter (2004) argues that the common good as an overarching aim of education and youth policy has been neglected, because individual goods have been given an increasing priority. De Winter defines the common good as a democracy and ‘democratic etiquette’ (2004, p. 3). He writes that ‘democracy is the crucial connection in a society that has been characterized historically by a high degree of diversity [the Netherlands]. Democracy makes a humane, organized way of living together possible between people or groups of people with different world views, political ideologies, etc.’ (2004, p. 7). By democracy, De Winter not only refers to a political system but to a certain way of life, and a certain type of person. ‘This way of life is characterized by the willingness to accept a democratic authority, by social justice, by empathy, the acknowledgment that people have the right to be different, the willingness to be tolerant, not to discriminate, and by the will to resolve conflicts in a peaceful manner’ (2004, p. 7, after Dewey 1923).

In order to keep the democratic way of life going, aiming for the common good in education is necessary, says De Winter. He calls this ‘societal education’ (“maatschappelijk opvoeden” 2004, p. 17). This is necessary, because if in a society too many people put their own good above the common good,
commitment and solidarity to that society will decrease. Eventually, rampant individualism and materialism undermines societal values such as reciprocity, compassion, and good citizenship (2004, p. 16)

Striving towards a good democratic society is not necessarily antagonistic to striving for a flourishing life. A person can both flourish and contribute to society. One could argue that flourishing is only possible within societal conditions such as De Winter’s description of democracy. Then, in order to be consistent, people who aim for flourishing must be also devoted to supporting these societal conditions. So people who strive for a flourishing life, if coherent, must have some obligation towards the kind of society that make their flourishing possible in the first place (cf. Varga 2011, 79).

Compassion

Compassion is the ability to ‘fellow-feeling’ (OED), feeling what and caring for what the other person feels. ‘Thomas Aquinas locates agape (caritas) in our will together with the other moral virtues. (..) According to Thomas, the fruits of agape are inner and outer harmony – joy, peace, compassion, kindness, caring for others and education of others’ (Wivestad 2008315-316). As Thomas writes; ‘compassion is especially called for when misfortune afflicts someone “who has not deserved it”, but also when a fault (deserving punishment) brings with it bad unforeseen consequences’ (II-II 30,1, quoted from Wivestad 2008, p. 317).

If the concept of human flourishing is described in terms of ‘self-actualization’, personal development and the like, it is often perceived to be the opposite of morality; (only) caring for oneself versus caring for the other, even though this is not a logical opposition; striving for individual aims does not exclude caring for other people. According to Varga (2011, 76) ‘both Tugendhat and Habermas consider the question of ancient ethics to be about what I really endorse and owe to myself, while modern ethics asks what it is what I owe to others (Tugendhat 1987, p. 44). (...) As a consequence of this tension, the connection between self-realization and morality or what we owe to others is normally thought of as antagonism’. Compassion is a moral virtue, which appears to be opposite to flourishing, which is about self-actualization. If ‘I’ strive to have a flourishing life, I can’t let other people’s flourishing ‘get in my way’. However, according to Aristotle’s conception of eudaimonia - which is an important source for work on human flourishing (see for example Kristjansson 2015; Rasmussen 1999) - a flourishing man is a virtuous man, which includes the cultivation of moral virtues. A ruthless businessman who makes his money exploiting other people, raising his children to live by the same values (greed and ruthlessness) can hardly be called a virtuous man, I would say. If human flourishing harks back to Aristotelian eudaimonia, shouldn’t we then not accept that compassion, as a moral virtue, is an aspect of human flourishing?
The question ‘what about compassion’ can also be interpreted in a different sense. Not (primarily) as an aim of education, but as a characteristic of a good parent/educator. It might be that by the question ‘what about compassion’, it is suggested that parents/educators who aim for their children to have flourishing lives, should do that with compassion. Wivestad (2008) argues that agape (unconditional love) and phronesis (practical wisdom) are important guidelines for education and educators. ‘Agape as compassion may help an adult to continue giving necessary learning challenges to a child, such as when the child reacts with ingratitude, harsh words or even complaints about the adult to others’ (Wivestad 2008, 321).

References