

# Introduction: A renewed character education following the pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine

## 1. Has the pandemic taught us anything?

A short time ago, at the beginning of September 2022, the Johns Hopkins University published a listing according to which there had been 580 million cases of Covid-19 worldwide and 6,4 million people had died as a result. These numbers are lower than the numbers of cases and deaths which really occurred; in fact, the OMS itself estimates that the real numbers could be two or three times the official figures, because there has been a notable lack of reliable tracking of the impact of the illness, in part for political reasons. We might bear in mind, as a basis for comparison, that all the Napoleonic wars — with which we Spanish are well acquainted — produced a total of between five and seven million deaths.

It would seem wise to reflect on what we have learned from this worldwide catastrophe and what effect it may have on matters of great importance, such as our concept of the human being, the measures in respect of research which should be taken in the future or our understanding of education after the pandemic.

If we analyze the many papers produced in the field of education because of the pandemic, it seems unfortunate that very few of them appear to address these basic issues. Worthy of mention is Curren's observation when he states that "Pandemic social distancing underscores the importance of asking whether direct and embodied interpersonal exchanges remain important to development and learning across the lifespan" (2022, p. 23). But to speak, as others have done, about ways of facing adversity, brings nothing

new to the debate; the same can be said of the secondary importance of studying ways to achieve a greater and better digitalization of teachers, students and teaching methods.

For our part, however, we feel that reflection on the pandemic in the field of education should lead us to the consideration that this disaster which has affected the whole world has manifested certain realities regarding human beings which many would prefer to ignore but which have regained their true importance, if we wish to devote our energies to the education of the younger generations.

We consider that there are five principal realities on which we need to focus.

In the first place, we need to remember that no education can be called authentic if it does not encourage the learner to reflect on the meaning of life. Indeed, a paper which appeared in this journal at the beginning of the pandemic alerted that the virus “is the source of numerous opportunities to ask ourselves, as Ivan Illich did shortly before his untimely death, whether we have lived as we should have “ (Ibáñez-Martín, 2020, p. 182). We have witnessed the imposition of a culture which maintains that any type of life is as worthy as any other; as a result (and helped by internet), the most degraded forms of life have appeared, from people who offer themselves to be eaten by others, something which has actually happened, to young people who declare that they have *ni foi ni loi* (neither faith nor law), or singers such as Sabina who recently declared that in his youth his only thoughts were about “sex, drugs and rock and roll”. This culture has not disappeared. But the unforeseen death of loved ones, of all ages, has led many to ask themselves about the type of life which is worth living.

Secondly, the vulnerability which characterizes the human condition has acquired a special notoriety. The *Dictionary of the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language* defines vulnerable as susceptible to wounds or injury, physical or moral. Traditionally, the need for protection from injury has always been recognized, whether the injury should come from crossing the street where we shouldn’t or from celebrating the Nation’s Day holding the wrong flag in an independence-minded neighborhood. But on some occasions reasonable protection is not enough. It is evident that in certain circumstances a person’s vulnerability is greater; this is, for example, the case of a mentally handicapped person, who is simply not equipped to defend himself. Sellman (2005) is right when he presents nursing care as an answer to that greater vulnerability: the extra care must take into account the dignity of the person and his protection, avoiding any kind of paternalism, and giving careful consideration to the lines which must not be crossed.

That said, the pandemic has helped us to discover our profound dependence on Nature. The May 68 revolution produced the idea that the difference between man and woman was irrelevant. Later on, the idea began to circulate that we were going to live a thousand

years; that scientific progress would necessarily lead to a transhumanism which would allow us to overcome intellectual and biological limitations; genetic engineering would allow us first to choose the characteristics we wanted for our children and then to ensure a much longer life for them. But reflection on the pandemic has led many to think that it is a mistake to confront nature and ignore the limits which it places on us.

This question is related in its turn to that of the limits of human autonomy. Kant, known for his defence of autonomy, maintained that it is the property of the will by which it becomes its own law. The idea was taken up again by Rawls in his famous book *A theory of justice*, published in 1971, and quoted no fewer than 105,095 times; he states that “to act autonomously is to act according to principles which we would consent to as relational, free and equal beings” (p. 516). The evolution of these ideas over the last fifty years has led to the belief that, as a basic aim of education, it is necessary to defend autonomy understood as limitless freedom in which the wish (to do something) is the only principle to be followed. However, this is perhaps not the most accurate interpretation of the concept of human autonomy. Using Fukuyama’s words, taken from his recent book *Liberalism and Its Discontents*, we would say that

the reign of autonomy has expanded constantly over time, from the freedom to obey rules within an existing moral framework, to the invention of rules by oneself. But respect for autonomy was destined to guide and mediate in the competition between deeply rooted beliefs, not to replace those beliefs in their entirety. Not all humans believe that maximizing their autonomy is the most important objective in life or that to disregard all forms of authority is necessarily a good thing. (p. 152)

Fourthly, we find that the pandemic has shown with great clarity the evils of the individualism which permeates our present day society. Many philosophical schools have pronounced warnings against the error of forgetting that we are political and social animals, believing that we are isolated monads and insisting on presenting our own likes or interests as rights which should be recognized. Some years ago, Robert Putman became well known for an article he wrote entitled “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital” (1995). In the article, Putman complained about the lack of participation in civic activities and that, although the number of people who bowled had increased, it was none the less true that many of those who played bowled alone; he considered this to be a symptom that there are more and more “virtual” friendships and fewer and fewer real friendships. It is also quite clear that the number of people who have died completely alone during the pandemic, either in hospital or at home, has been another cause for serious reflection. Which brings us to the fifth and final point.

Indeed, it is necessary to stress the degree to which the importance of solidarity and care has increased. The response of a large part of the world to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is an important manifestation of solidarity, which might not have happened in earlier times. That

solidarity is expressed even by bringing Ukrainian families with their children into people's homes without a thought about how they are going to be fed. And we have witnessed that solidarity in the fact that many doctors and nurses have lost their lives as a result of the attention they have given to Covid patients; many priests have also exposed themselves to grave risks in their attention to infected people in hospitals and at home. Another example of solidarity has been that many people decided to bring food to elderly neighbors and even to look after ill people with whom they had had very little prior contact.

As Christians we should remember the parable from the Gospel: my neighbor, who I should love as I love myself is anyone who is in need of help that I can give. It is, of course, quite clear that there are beliefs other than Christianity which express love of my neighbor. But it is evident that in the Incarnation and death of Jesus Christ we encounter a luminous account of the love which God has for men and which gives us the assurance that there is someone who loves me and that, as Benedict XVI states (2005, n<sup>a</sup> 17), doing a reference to the classics, that authentic love is to want the same thing and to reject the same thing, having common thoughts and desires. God loved us first and when we discover that love, we discover the meaning of our life, and we seek God's love and the exclusive and definitive love expressed in the marriage bond.

None of these ideas should be forgotten. On the contrary, they should form the basis of a renewed education of character which has learned lessons from the dramatic pandemic we have suffered. So let's continue by looking at how we could go about designing a sound education which rises to the challenges of our times.

## 2. What can we ask of education today?

We have examined the relevant ideas which the pandemic has brought home to many, although there also may be some, even many, who would like to close their eyes to reality. In these circumstances, we are bound to reflect on the criteria which should be taken into account in respect of education, because up to now education has been limited to the areas of access to scientific knowledge, skills competencies or civics. By no means do we wish to disqualify these educational activities. Our aim is to emphasize the need to look for a renewed character education which will lead youth to attain the most profound development of their being.

This renewal has recently been the subject of study from a variety of different perspectives, and it would perhaps be useful as an introduction to indicate three areas of special interest at the present time.

In the first place, the best character education introduces the moral element into the field of education. This fact has three main consequences which have an important effect on the curriculum, on teaching practice and on the students.

- a) The curriculum ceases to be, as Nodding's points out (2019), a mere accumulation of contents that must be learned. What's more, if the moral criterion is not present in the selection of contents, then the selection becomes arbitrary, circumstantial or, in the best of cases, simply an expression of the position of the majority. But experience has shown that majorities do not always respect human dignity (Nussbaum, 2012). Therefore, although the ethical element is also debatable, basically in respect of its essence, it should not be omitted in the selection of curricular content: a moral element should be present in the design of the curricula.
- b) In today's world, the teacher acquires a renewed relevance for two reasons: it will no longer be sufficient for the teacher to transmit uncritically what is accepted by the majority or prescribed by others. He will cease to be a mere dispenser of the curriculum (Pring, 2016) and become a transmitter of culture, a promoter of critical thinking and a guarantor both quality of the content transmitted and of his ability to promote the rounded development of his students' personalities.
- c) On their side, the students will have a different view of the teaching institution and of their teachers. These will no longer be simply places and agents who enable them to acquire knowledge which will help them to earn a living, but something of much greater importance — they will help them to find the meaning of their existence.

Secondly, character education allows us to deal with some of the historical problems, both theoretical and practical, which have beset moral education. Let's look at three of those problems.

- a) Perhaps we can begin with the one which has proved to be the most difficult: while many teachers recognize the importance of helping their students to become good people, they admit their inability to approach the task for two reasons. On the one hand, they are afraid of falling into illegitimate indoctrination. On the other, they are afraid of entering into the sphere of family education or they have received no specific training in that area. In this sense, character education allows for a clear and accessible language on moral questions, and through the teaching of virtues it is possible to make moral learning operative and adapted to specific everyday situations and in a way which is shared by students' families.
- b) Secondly, character education draws attention to the behavior of the teachers themselves, not only in what is commonly termed their professional duties, that is their commitment to fulfil the terms of their work contract, but also in respect of the manner of being of the educator in a wider sense. The reason is that no individual can teach others what he himself does not understand, and it is not possible to fully understand virtues if they are not practiced (Carr, 1991). The idea that being a good educator is

related to being a good person (Martínez, Esteban, Jover, & Payá, 2016), is upheld by the theory of behavioral transfer, which posits that educators cannot establish strict limits between their professional and their personal lives. It also upholds the dignity of the profession itself and the enormous influence, which is characteristic of the teaching profession, in that inadequate behavior would affect a number of young people whose process of maturity could be seriously compromised (Ibáñez-Martín, 2017).

- c) Finally, the renewed character education will allow educators to overcome the dichotomy of cognitivism-emotivism which has paralyzed moral education and divided researchers and educators. Kohlberg's model was questioned on the grounds of its excessive Kantian based rationalism and its universalism to the detriment of the particular, and also because of its inherent inability to promote moral behavior. On the other hand, the proposals of the emotivist inheritors of Hume, which first arose in response to intellectualist models, suffered from excessive subjectivity and were opposed to the identification of objective criteria as references for full human development. The proposals for character education can overcome these problems since they contemplate both rational and affective criteria in determining the moral response (Carr, 2005), which must take circumstances into account and be moderated by the virtue of prudence.

These are the ideas which are at present under discussion in the field of character education. We believe that the emerging proposals in character education are opening hopeful new horizons for an education which will be truly comprehensive and facilitate formation in the widest sense of the word. Every father, mother or teacher is well aware of the difficulty of providing a good education for their children or students, and it is likely that their deepest concerns are not limited simply to achieving good grades at the end of the school year, something which on occasion is used by those in political power, supposedly to save itself problems; but also, and more importantly, they would like to be able to say that the younger generation are well formed people, who are not carried away by passing fashions, who are capable of using their intelligence and managing their emotions. Fully aware that every individual is responsible for his or her own life, we cannot, as educators, close our eyes to the difficulties which many are facing today - those who find it difficult to discover what it means to be male or female currently and in view of their own circumstances. It is therefore important to offer scenarios which propitiate ways and means to achieve the plenitude to which we all aspire, the full development of personality which is required of education by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

It is evident that character education does not have the key to resolve all educational problems. We believe, however, that without it we would simply not be facing up to and trying to solve some of the most worrying issues of our times.



Naturally, one monograph in a journal cannot claim to address all the problems which character education attempts to solve. Therefore, we are going to offer a summary of the various articles which we have published, from very varying viewpoints and countries.

This issue begins with an article by Professors Aurora Bernal Martínez de Soria and Concepción Naval on “Flourishing as the aim of character education”. The objective of this article is to investigate whether human flourishing is the aim of character education. The authors analyse publications on flourishing and moral education in the Anglo-American area and conclude that not every concept of flourishing is an aim of education, and that character education is insufficient to promote human flourishing in a most clearly moral sense.

Next there is a paper by Randall Curren on “Overcoming what divides us: Global Civic Friendship and ‘Full development of the Human Personality’”. Professor Curren states that character education is not solely a question of cultivating virtues; it should also promote global civic friendship through the formation of educational communities and friendships. This formative work requires the participation of the whole school; it should respect justice and promote contacts and friendship between different groups.

Professors Edward Brooks and Jorge L. Villacís, from different countries, are the authors of an article entitled “To educate citizen and citizen-leaders for our society. Renewing character education in universities”. The authors propose a renewal of character education with the aim of educating leaders who can materialize what the SDG4 proposes in respect of enhancing citizen ethics, while respecting sustainable development and the building of global citizenship. They propose a return to the cultivation of virtue in character education since education in values and attitudes is an essential component of education for global citizenship and leadership.

The following article, written by Francisco Esteban Bara and M.<sup>a</sup> Carmen Caro, is entitled “The cultivation of critical thinking through university tutoring: A new opportunity after Covid-19”. The authors indicate that the reality of the pandemic has produced a suggestive revision of the university tutorial which reexamines its usefulness; because it had become an exclusively academic tutorial at the present time, its usefulness is questioned. The authors propose that the meetings between the tutor and the tutored student should prioritize character education, helping them to think and encouraging them not tire of seeking the truth and to concentrate their search on the common good. The authors also contribute some practical suggestions on how to cultivate the spirit through the promotion of critical thinking.

This monograph would be incomplete without an article on character education in the classical world. Professor David Hernández de la Fuente analyses this aspect of the subject in “Educational reforms for a crisis. On the education of character in Plato and

Aristotle”. The author analyses the crisis which our society is suffering and affirms that the solution it demands is character education; he would like to see a recovery of what Plato and Aristotle stated in respect of how to develop and strengthen good character through the discharge of civic obligations. Through an analysis of the principal texts on character education of the two thinkers, the author suggests solutions to improve education in this turbulent world in which we must live.

Professor José Antonio Ibáñez-Martín entitles his paper “The plural concept of good character”, in which he illustrates the differences between the English meaning of *good character* and the diverse meanings of *buen carácter* (good character) in Spanish, pointing out the different qualities which identify these meanings. To this end, he carries out a philological, philosophical, and psycho-pedagogical analysis. After, he defends the importance of the good literature in character education and proposes a transcended reading of *Don Quixote* (*The Ingenious Knight Don Quixote of La Mancha*), as a relevant expression of Spanish culture, to study the principal human qualities of good character to be found therein.

Doctor Juan Luis Fuentes and Jorge Valero-Berzosa write on “New digital virtues or virtues for the digital context. Do we need a new model of character education?” The authors wish to address the question of why technology has colonized our lives. The article attempts to answer the question of whether it is necessary to elaborate a new template of virtues for the new digital world, which would require, as a solution to the evils of the digital paradigm, the promotion of critical thinking. They conclude that a substantial change to the classical pattern of virtues is not necessary, but they stress the special need to foment critical thinking, responsibility, and the safeguard of privacy.

Professors Zaida Espinosa Zárate, Josu Ahedo Ruiz and Miguel Rumayor address the subject of “Friendship and character education: A systematic review”; they attempt to answer the question of whether friendship can be useful in the development of virtues. This systematic review of scientific articles published between 2007 and 2021 endeavors to identify what type of relationship exists between character and friendship. A psychological focus is predominant in the articles reviewed, but the cultivation of friendship requires a philosophical-moral focus which underlines the humanizing potential of friendship, given that it is a good in itself.

Hailing from different continents, Professors Juan P. Dabdoub, Aitor R. Salaverria and Marvin W. Berkowitz write about “Identifying practices to promote character development in university residential settings: The case of Colegios Mayores”. The authors wish to answer the question of whether it is necessary to integrate training programs of character education in university halls of residence. Through the answers to a questionnaire given by 19 directors of Halls of Residence (Colegios Mayores) in



Spain, they investigate how the six educational practices proposed by Étienne Wenger have been put into effect.

This issue closes with a paper by María José Ibáñez Ayuso, who presents another perspective in respect of the halls of residence and shows that character education does not terminate at the end of the secondary school cycle. The title of the article is “The Spanish Colegios Mayores: The pedagogical value of a longstanding institution”; it stresses the need to revalue the importance of the formation received by the students in the halls of residence. Working from an interpretive viewpoint and centering on character education, the author concludes that the halls of residence are spaces which generate innumerable opportunities to cultivate character, to foment critical thinking in search of truth and to experience a synthesis of knowledge and an encounter with tradition.

To all the above, our most sincere gratitude.

**José Antonio Ibáñez-Martín and Josu Ahedo**

*Editors*

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