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Repensando el camino hacia el florecimiento: educación, epifanía y *Una vida que merezca la pena ser vivida*

Rethinking the Route to Flourishing: Education, Epiphany, and a Life Worth Living

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Abstract:

How can education contribute to human flourishing? In our previous work, we have argued that transformative methods of teaching and learning are the most compelling available for advancing the flourishing of young people in the classroom. Although the idea of an education for flourishing has been the topic of some controversy in the last few years, with some scholars forcefully defending and some rejecting the notion as a guiding aim of education, much of this discussion has occurred at a high level of abstraction, focusing on the philosophical foundations and ethical implications of flourishing as a concept. Parallel to this debate, there has been growing interest in an approach to education based on a popular course at Yale University called the "Life Worth Living" Framework, which has a stated focus on offering guidance to students for "defining and then creating a flourishing life." In this paper, we engage with the Life Worth Living framework, as it presents a provocative case study for examining the potential risks and rewards of educational programs designed to foster students' flourishing. At the same time, the framework raises important questions about what it means to teach for flourishing, since the way it understands how flourishing is advanced operates on several philosophical premises that, to our minds, deserve closer examination.

Keywords: well-being, education, transformative teaching, meaningful life, philosophy pedagogy

Resumen:

¿Cómo puede contribuir la educación al florecimiento humano? En nuestro artículo anterior, argumentamos que los métodos de enseñanza y aprendizaje transformadores son los más eficaces y convincentes para promover el florecimiento de los jóvenes en el aula. Si bien la idea de una educación orientada al florecimiento ha sido objeto de cierta controversia en los

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últimos años —con algunos académicos defendiéndola enérgicamente y otros rechazándola como objetivo pedagógico orientativo—, gran parte de este debate se ha desarrollado en un alto nivel de abstracción, centrado en los fundamentos filosóficos y las implicaciones éticas del florecimiento como concepto. Paralelamente a este debate, ha ido creciendo el interés por un enfoque educativo basado en un curso popular de la Universidad de Yale titulado *Life Worth Living* (Una vida que merezca la pena ser vivida), cuyo objetivo declarado es ofrecer orientación a los alumnos para «definir y posteriormente construir una vida floreciente». En este artículo nos centraremos en dicho enfoque, puesto que representa un estudio de caso sugerente para determinar los posibles riesgos y recompensas de los programas educativos orientados al florecimiento de los alumnos. Al mismo tiempo, el enfoque plantea importantes cuestiones sobre lo que significa enseñar para el florecimiento, ya que la forma de entender cómo se promueve este proceso se basa en varias premisas filosóficas que, en nuestra opinión, merecen un examen más detenido.

Palabras clave: bienestar, educación, enseñanza transformadora, vida significativa, filosofía, pedagogía

1. Introduction

How can education contribute to human flourishing? More importantly, how can our teaching contribute to the flourishing of the individual students currently sitting in our classrooms? In our previous work, we have argued that transformative methods of teaching and learning are the most compelling available for advancing the flourishing of young people. Transformative methods foreground the quality of students' everyday experiences, encouraging teachers to consider how their subject matter illuminates the world outside and how it can make students' conscious experiences more enriching and inspiring. Our claim is that the academic disciplines provide the conceptual and phenomenological material to enable this enrichment of experience, provided teachers can demonstrate—through their own example—how it has contributed to their own growing understanding, appreciation, and passion for the phenomena involved. With this orientation, transformative teaching and learning are not just about increasing students' sense of subjective well-being; it is about cultivating students' capacity and confidence to create a flourishing life (Jonas & Yacek, 2024; Yacek, 2021, 2020; Jonas & Nakazawa, 2020; Yacek & Gary, 2020; Yacek & Ijaz, 2020).

Over the last decade or so, there has been a growing interest in an approach to education for flourishing that differs in key ways from the transformative view we have previously advanced. Based on a popular class at Yale University, this approach is known as the "Life Worth Living" Framework, with its stated focus on offering guidance to students for "defining and then creating a flourishing life" (Volf, Croasmun, McAnnally-Linz, 2023, inside cover). This framework draws on key insights from the world's most influential philosophical and religious traditions to prompt personal reflection on how, or whether, the everyday shape of one's life is connected to the acquisition of genuine human goods, as outlined by these traditions. Students are to explore these sources for the guidance they can provide in pursuing meaningful vocations and life goals, grappling with personal failure and suffering, and confronting death and the process of self-transformation. The Life Worth Living framework does not stipulate which traditions or strategies are most helpful for addressing each of these aspects of human flourishing. Rather, it encourages students to ask and answer for themselves what it calls the Question:

> There are countless ways to try to express it: What matters most? What is a good life? What is the shape of flourishing life? What kind of life is worthy of our humanity? What is true life? What is right and true and good? None of these phrasings captures it completely… Hard as it is to pin it down, it is the Question of our lives. The Question is about worth, value, good and bad, and evil, meaning, purpose, final aims and ends, beauty, truth, justice, what we owe one another, what the world is, and who we are and how we live. It is about the success of our lives or their failure. (p. xv)

The Life Worth Living framework is unique because it constitutes a particularly explicit effort to make personal flourishing and reflection on the good life a central organizing feature of the learning environment. In fact, it is one of the most concerted efforts to shape the educational experience around student flourishing that we have come across to date. Its success as the basis of a popular course at Yale University makes it all the more compelling an object of scholarly attention.

Of course, the idea of an education for flourishing has been the topic of some controversy in the last few years, with some scholars forcefully defending (Kristjánsson & VanderWeele, 2024; cf. Brighouse, 2006; De Ruyter, 2004; De Ruyter & Wolbert, 2020; Reiss & White, 2013; Schinkel et al. 2023; White, 2006; Wolbert, De Ruyter & Schinkel 2015) and some rejecting (Carr, 2021; Hand forthcoming; Siegel forthcoming) the notion as a guiding aim of education. Much of this discussion has taken place at a high level of abstraction, focusing on the philosophical foundations and ethical implications of the concept of flourishing. Engaging with the Life Worth Living framework offers a helpful contrast to this discussion, we believe, since it constitutes a kind of case study for determining the potential risks and rewards of educational programs conceived in this manner. At the same time, the framework raises important questions about what it means to teach *for* flourishing, since the way it understands how flourishing is advanced operates on several philosophical premises that, to our minds, deserve closer examination.

Our argument in the paper proceeds in several steps. First, we briefly discuss the recent debate on flourishing as an educational aim in the scholarly literature. Here we concentrate on Kristjánsson's insightful treatment in his 2021 book, *Flourishing as the Aim of Education*, arguing that much of Kristjánsson's vision constitutes a compelling approach for the flourishing classroom, though his stance on the role of epiphanies in this endeavor is partially mistaken. Against this backdrop, we then consider the Life Worth Living approach to teaching for flourishing in some depth. Here, too, we find some aspects of the program to be very promising for supporting students' flourishing, and some to need correction and augmentation if it is to fulfill its stated purpose. In closing, we turn back to a transformative account of education for flourishing, outlining the several tasks that teachers will need to accomplish in the classroom if their efforts are to advance students' flourishing.

2. Making Flourishing Matter

That flourishing constitutes a legitimate aim of education has been the subject of debate over the last few years. Scholars such as Hand (forthcoming), Siegel (forthcoming) and Carr (2021) have argued that flourishing is not what we should be after, citing (among other things) argumentative lacunae in the defense of flourishing as an educational aim, lack of specificity regarding the constituents of flourishing, issues concerning student autonomy, and, perhaps most troublingly, oversights concerning the degree to which the constituents of flourishing are practically teachable or even educable in theory.

In a recent article, Kristjánsson and VanderWeele (2024) have rejoined that flourishing rightly constitutes an "overarching educational aim" (p. 4; cf. Kristjansson, 2021), arguing compellingly that appropriate conceptual refinements can alleviate each of the proposed problems. Their main line of argument is that flourishing as an aim of education indeed contains non-educable aspects, but *not all* constituents of flourishing are non-

educable. Moreover, many of the *preconditions* necessary for flourishing—such as various cognitive, emotional, and conative dispositions—constitute important outcomes of educational processes and can be taught. Regarding issues of autonomy, Kristjánsson and VanderWeele point out that flourishing, though it presupposes a conception of the human good, is not only sufficiently broad to garner wide consensus across philosophical and religious boundaries; it provides a compelling alternative to the reigning conception of well-being embodied in current educational systems—viz. human capital theory. At root, the authors show that introducing flourishing as a guiding educational aim allows us to move past reductive accounts of what is worth striving for in education and allows both theorists and practitioners to bring "at least certain aspects of happiness, health, purpose, character, social relationships, and financial self-sufficiency" (p. 14) into the educational fold.

With this contribution, Kristjánsson and VanderWeele provide a much-needed corrective to the debate concerning flourishing as an educational goal. As we see it, none of the issues raised by critics seriously undermines the notion of flourishing as a regulative ideal of education. At the same time, Kristjansson & VanderWeele make a practical case for flourishing at a systemic level, discussing the broad areas of educational practice that contribute to flourishing, but not the forms of classroom engagement that would advance the aim. For example, they argue that education for flourishing involves "[p]rogrammes specifically focused on character development, social-emotional learning, well-being enhancement, or practical skills like nutrition and financial management" and belongs together with efforts to foster "students' knowledge, understanding, and the cognitive skills and epistemic virtues that facilitate knowledge and understanding" (p. 9). However, the authors do not specify whether flourishing as an educational aim *changes the character of how these educational practices are conducted in the classroom*.

It is precisely here that Kristjánsson's (2021) previous book-length treatment of flourishing offers some further guidance. One of the most significant contributions of this book, to our minds, is its demonstration of how an orientation towards flourishing alters pedagogical goal-setting and decision-making. In essence, Kristjánsson argues that a host of sources, which have engaged with human flourishing—from empirical psychological studies to philosophical treatments and religious thought—point to an oft-overlooked set of emotional dispositions and virtues that teachers devoted to flourishing cannot afford to ignore in the classroom. Contemplation and wonder, awe and enchantment, elevation, and "love of the transcendent" (p. 109) are crucial components of a flourishing human life, says Kristjánsson, and therefore our classrooms should be places where these experiences are cultivated. To use an example that Kristjánsson discusses, science teachers should not just seek to transmit cognitive skills, intellectual capacities, and scientific facts that often exhaust the curriculum in these spaces. These are essential, of course. However, if teachers are truly to take the full psychological spectrum of flourishing seriously, they should also create opportunities to *marvel* at the phenomena of science—to feel a deep appreciation, meaning, and personal elevation when studying them. The same goes, Kristjánsson argues, for contexts of moral education. Even here, in what appear to be straightforward processes of emulation and admiration, awe and the capacity to marvel at moral beauty play a significant role. For Kristjánsson, art has a special power to motivate such experiences, and in the final lines of the book, he makes a spirited case for incorporating more of it into the classroom.

We could not agree more with Kristjánsson's appeal for flourishing in the classroom, and particularly his insights into how an orientation towards flourishing transforms the mundanity of typical teaching and learning. Much of what we have argued for under the heading of transformative education is closely aligned with Kristjánsson's proposal, and we, too, believe art has an important role to play in the classroom. In our work, we tend to emphasize the power of disciplines themselves in bringing about the experiences and virtues he highlights. Similar to Kristjánsson's discussion of science, we argue that academic disciplines embody unique forms of life that are in themselves sources of fascination and awe; thus, part of education

for flourishing is an initiation into these forms of life. However, the value of such disciplinary initiation ultimately resides in its capacity to enrich our experience and our lives, making them richer and more flourishing; therefore, our position ends up quite close to what Kristjánsson hopes to advance.

One point of difference does remain when comparing Kristjánsson's and our own approach to education for flourishing. In our view, epiphanies are absolutely central to any educational space aimed at students' flourishing. There are two main reasons for thinking so. The first is that occasions of the various emotions and experiences described above are arguably only morally desirable when they are coupled with psychological restructurings that cause us to desire the Good more firmly, i.e., when they occasion *epiphanically*. As Kristjánsson himself points out, experiences like awe and wonder are not inherently moral; moral educators should strive for "virtuous awe" (Kristjánsson, 2021, p. 133), which encompasses wonder, elevation, and love of the transcendent. This dimension—in our view—is secured by the concept of epiphany, since epiphanies are by definition connected to a desire for the Good. Secondly, because such emotions and virtues are at odds with students' typical ways of navigating the world, particularly with the sensational media that young people are consuming at an alarming rate, they are likely to emerge through more sudden or powerful experiences. Epiphanies, therefore, also play an important role in priming students for developing the moral habits that we, and Kristjánsson himself, hope will result in the long run. Although epiphanies are by no means easy to bring about in the classroom, teachers' passion, purpose, and integrity with respect to the subject matter can serve as a helpful foundation for students to begin seeing the value of new moral perspectives and practices in epiphanic moments and to cultivate these insights in their lives thereafter. (We will go into this point more fully when we turn to the Life Worth Living framework below.)

Although Kristjánsson devotes an entire chapter in the book we have been describing to the notion of epiphany, he arrives at a rather cautious conclusion about its role in the classroom. Kristjánsson appears to be concerned about *intentionally* seeking epiphanic experiences in pedagogical spaces. For example, he suggests that contexts such as "adventure education" and "service learning" may be able to provide conditions "in which the sudden epiphanic growth would be stimulated obliquely through the challenges of the experience itself, rather than aimed for directly" (p. 133). Although Kristjánsson points out, referring to Jonas (2015), that Plato's works provide provocative examples of epiphany-inducing dialogues and therefore potentially a classroom-friendly methodology for epiphanic growth "without dictating the way" (ibid.), he ends the chapter in an ambiguous vein:

> I am tempted to conclude [...] that schooling which forecloses the option of an epiphanic moral conversion does not constitute good education. ... To what extent this option should be buttressed and stimulated in the classroom is another question, however, and answering it will require not only a much fuller, empirically informed theory about moral conversions and their role in student flourishing, but also considerable educational *phronesis* on the part of the teacher. (p. 134)

In a recent paper, Kristjánsson (forthcoming) takes up precisely this open question again. Although the ambiguity in his previous work allowed room to imagine a pedagogy of classroom epiphanies, his tone in the later piece has markedly changed. His tack here is to offer several criteria for an experience to count as epiphanic, and then, based on these criteria, to show that two paradoxes arise when we attempt to induce epiphanies in the classroom—the "psycho-epistemic" and "psycho-moral" paradox. He considers these paradoxes troubling and even fatal to the use of epiphanies in the classroom.

Kristjánsson defines the psycho-epistemic paradox in this way: "The epistemic factor here is the antecedent grasp of a plan, which presumably involves knowledge about V and how to get to it, combined with the psychological fact that no definite psychological evidence exists about how this is best accomplished, or even accomplished at all" (n. p.). To restate it more simply: teachers need a plan for creating an epiphany, but since they lack the relevant

psychological knowledge to devise a foolproof plan for epiphanic change, they are unable to create one.

To our minds, this argument does not yield a genuine paradox, since "planning" for epiphanies need not be understood in the strong sense of *guaranteeing* its success. Teachers can, and do, follow certain strategies to create epiphanies that have proven successful in the past. As they improve as educators, so will their strategies for creating epiphanies. They will never be able to create a *foolproof* plan, of course, since even the most skilled educators cannot control the complex inner workings of students' minds and souls (and they would not want to do so anyway), but they *can* create a plan for epiphanies with increasing success.

Regarding the psycho-moral paradox, a similar issue of language seems to be at work. Kristjánsson writes:

> A dedicated teacher has a moral duty to help a student enact radical self-change in order to overcome developmental and existential challenges to her wellbeing. A dedicated teacher is not morally entitled to set in motion any interventions unless she is reasonably confident about the outcome and can plan it beforehand. However, by definition, radical self-change is (typically) epiphanic and spontaneous and cannot be preplanned. Hence, paradoxically, *the teacher both has and does not have a moral duty to set this process in motion* (n. p.; italics in original)

This definition can, if certain words are interpreted in a specific way, appear paradoxical. But the paradox found in them is dependent upon a narrow interpretation of the second premise—viz. The idea is that teachers can pursue only those pedagogical courses whose outcomes are measurable and consistently achievable. On the one hand, it is true that teachers, of all ages and disciplines, should have "reasonable confidence in the outcomes" of the pedagogical strategies that they use. But this does not mean that only those pedagogical strategies are allowable whose outcomes can be guaranteed. Such certainty in education is impossible. So, the question then becomes: what constitutes reasonable confidence? This confidence stems from teachers' own psychological acumen, their prior pedagogical experiences, and their understanding of the importance of helping students overcome their deficiencies and support their moral aspirations. In these ways, teachers can act in a morally directed manner—i.e., to bring about experiences of awe, elevation, and so on—and do so with a well-reasoned plan, even though the outcomes cannot be guaranteed.

Behind this issue are concerns, it seems, about the potentially negative outcomes of epiphanies, which, particularly when only half-completed, do come with certain moral risks. We have argued in the past that educators interested in the transformative project should be aware that deep psychological restructurings can throw students into an existentially precarious position, weakening ties to meaningful communities and forms of life, undermining their sense of self, and questioning their previous ways of formulating worthwhile life goals and projects (Yacek, 2021; Yacek, 2020). However, it is precisely for this reason that teachers need to understand their transformative efforts in a certain way. The goal is not to simply "call into question" what students hold dear, as some scholars, all too committed to the critical project in education, have suggested; to "emancipate" students from roles the educator finds restrictive; or to "convert" students to some preferred ideology or way of life. Rather, the goal of the transformative classroom is to demonstrate through epiphanies that the world is richer, more exciting, and more awe-inspiring than one thought it to be, and to point to communities (e.g., disciplines) in which this kind of experience can be further cultivated and appreciated. Frankly, we think Kristjánsson's second paradox can only provide critical force if we are operating on a reductive, or inherently flawed view of personal transformation and epiphany, and dissolves when the proper aims and methods of the transformative classroom are adopted (for a fuller discussion, see Jonas, forthcoming; Yacek & Gary, forthcoming).

3. Foregrounding Flourishing

To summarize the discussion so far, education for flourishing encompasses at least these four unique domains of pedagogical initiative:

1. Teachers go beyond a reductive view of education's relationship to student well-being and recognize the educational importance of experiences of awe, enchantment, beauty, and wonder.
2. Teachers prime students to have such experiences by modelling their own encounters with them and working against psychological habits that may prevent them.
3. Teachers create conditions for epiphanies to occur in the classroom, understood as moments in which experiences of awe, enchantment, beauty, and wonder arise.
4. Teachers help students work out the implications of such epiphanies for their lives.

This "meta-curriculum" of education for flourishing is, of course, not exhaustive. As we have already mentioned, there are countless tasks that teachers and students will need to perform that have less to do directly with these kinds of experiences and more to do with acquiring disciplinary acumen and an appreciation of disciplinary learning. The four domains are important to mention here, however, because they give such tasks their deeper, existential importance. After all, students learn within the disciplines not merely to acquire disciplinary knowledge, but because having this knowledge introduces them to forms of life that are exciting to be a part of and enrich their experience of the everyday world.

Although the four domains cover a fair bit of ground in determining the content and aims of a flourishing classroom, there may still be something missing. What Kristjánsson and we seem to have overlooked are more explicit attempts to address the issue of flourishing in the classroom. In a sense, we tend to see flourishing as something that *results* from various experiences with subject matter, experiences which are orchestrated and guided by the teacher. However, we know that the project of creating a flourishing life for oneself is wrapped up in countless decisions in everyday life—both big and small—that can detract from or contribute to our flourishing, even if we have had powerful moral experiences that have put us on the right path. Put differently, since human beings possess a unique degree of self-determination, they bear the special burden of planning, executing, and then assessing the moral quality of their actions so that they can steer their lives toward flourishing-conducive ends. While experiences and emotional responses, such as the ones just mentioned, clearly play an important role here, so do more explicit forms of reasoning and reflection on the Good life.

Enter the Life Worth Living approach. This approach is expressly designed to support young people's quests to lead a flourishing life, particularly by encouraging explicit reflection on ultimate aims and purposes and how these come to bear in their daily lives. The proponents of this approach argue that flourishing requires concerted personal engagement, and they have developed a compelling structure to foster it in the college classroom (Volf, Croasmun, & McAnnally-Linz, 2023).

The Life Worth Living approach is structured by four guiding principles, if we are correct in our understanding of the program. The first principle concerns how we can grasp the concept of flourishing in the first place. The authors argue that the question of one's flourishing should be broken down into several subquestions that speak to various domains of life and common human experiences that directly impact our flourishing. In a word, the Life Worth Living framework emphasizes *flourishing-related decision-making* as it appears in daily life. In our accounting, there are seven questions that the program framers take to derive from the general question, "How can I flourish?" We have listed these below in their original form, as well as our translation into more systematic terms in relation to the principle of decision-making for flourishing.

Table 1. A catechism of flourishing

LWL approach question	**Translation into questions of flourishing-related decision-making**
Whom do we answer to?	What people or groups are we most concerned about doing right by when we make flourishing-related decisions?
How does a good life feel?	What emotional states are prioritized when we make flourishing-related decisions?
What should we hope for?	What future emotional states, personal achievements, or states of affairs are our flourishing-related decisions meant to help bring about?
How should we live?	What principles and values (should) govern our everyday lives?
What do we do when we (inevitably) botch it?	How do our flourishing-related decisions account for (the possibility of) failure?
What do we do when life hurts and there's no fixing it?	How do our flourishing-related decisions account for unavoidable suffering?
What do we do when life ends?	How do our flourishing-related decisions account for our death?

We find this "catechism of flourishing" very helpful for guiding both teachers and students in systematic reflection on the moral quality of their lives, since it touches on so many domains of flourishing-related decision-making: (1) social responsibility, (2) emotional life, (3) moral ideals, (4) life goals, (5) bedrock values, (6) failure, (7) suffering, and (8) mortality. Just about anything we might experience or strive for in life can be assigned to one or more of these categories; thus, the framework possesses tremendous potential for highlighting issues that matter most to students. The focus on how students make their regular, everyday decisions further increases the potential impact of the approach, since the results of one's reflections can—theoretically at least—be applied immediately. It is rare to find an educational program that takes the lives of students seriously right now.

The second principle of the Life Worth Living approach pertains to how engagement with questions like these is conducted in the classroom. In a word, the framers of the approach recommend *first-hand, personal engagement* with the questions listed above. Pedagogically speaking, this means that courses using the approach involve an eclectic variety of classroom and extra-curricular activities in which the individual student is called on to share personal experiences, aspirations, fears, and struggles. Students are also encouraged to consider the media and texts used in class, always in reference to how they construct their everyday lives and how their lives would have to change if the text or medium under discussion were true. These engagements take place in various forms, including small and large-group discussions, retreats, visits to museums or places of worship, and memoir-style writing assignments or auto-ethnographic accounts of one's daily routines. This principle, like the first, makes the approach particularly compelling as a means of engaging students in concerted reflection on the moral quality of their everyday existence.

The third guiding principle of the Life Worth Living approach gives it its special character and feel. According to the authors, it is first and foremost *traditions*, and in particular, the Big Six religious traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Confucianism, and Buddhism) plus secular Utilitarianism, that help us get answers to these questions off the ground. By and large, the media used as the foundations of classwork and discussion descend from one of these traditions, typically less from latter-day theologians and interpreters than from the central texts that guide these traditions. The framework follows a principle of *prioritizing tradition* in constructing inquiries into the moral quality of one's life. In doing so, the framework advances a kind of perennialism regarding inquiry into the good life, according to which questions of how to flourish and exemplars of flourishing human lives are considered to be central to the main religious and philosophical traditions. That said, the authors reject a thoroughgoing philosophical perennialism that would suggest these various traditions come to the *same* answers about how to lead a good life.

Finally, a fourth principle of the Life Worth Living approach pertains to the manner in which directive or non-directive teachers should approach questions of such existential importance. Also on this point, the framers are clear: teachers should *not* recommend any one tradition over another; they should not provide particular answers to any of the questions for students to adopt; instead, they should leave the answering of these questions up to the students. In their own program documentation, the framers of the program use the term "truth-seeking pluralism" to describe their efforts in this sense; however, we believe this fourth principle is better captured by the concept of *existential non-directiveness*.

Take a typical example from their book. At the end of a chapter devoted to overarching ideals of a flourishing life, the authors turn to the question, "So how should we live?" They have just surveyed the thoughts of James Madison, Nietzsche, the Bhagavad Gita, Jeremy Bentham, the Torah, Mencius, Confucius, and Jesus, and here is how they respond to the ultimate question on which these sources have weighed in:

> You know by now that we're not going to give you a straight answer. Here, of all places, it's your job to discern the answer as best you can. (We're doing our best to answer the question for ourselves too.) But what can you take with you from the voices you've heard in this chapter? First, keep an eye on ends. Think seriously about what a well-lived life is after. Don't just assume it's after

> happiness. … Second, make sure to answer the forest question [concerning how wide the circle of moral responsibility extends]. Third, get comfortable with being unsure. Any of these options will leave you in a place where it's really difficult to be certain about how to live. … Finally, you can't give a good answer to the question of how to live without answering the questions from the other chapters. … In fact, the intertwining of these questions and their answers goes a long way toward making a real *vision* of true, flourishing life. (pp. 99-100)

There is clearly much to be said for an approach that places so much trust and agency in students. In fact, on such questions, it would seem that we as educators would want to leave as much agency as is pedagogically appropriate, given how personal these questions are for one's sense of existential purpose and meaning. And yet, we think this degree of nondirectiveness may lead us towards the same issues that arose when discussing the (not quite paradoxical) paradox concerning epiphanies above. To recall, Kristjánsson's concern was directed at the moral duties that contradict one another in the transformative classroom, particularly the students' need for transformation on the one hand and the moral damages that such transformations can bring about. Kristjánsson and the framers of the Life Worth Living approach seem to want to err on the side of caution: Since there are moral hazards here, and since our democratic *ethos* holds personal autonomy in such high regard, better to leave the moral insights to students, while the educators play the comparatively nondirective role of the discussion-shaper and text-suggester.

The problem with this strategy, and the nondirective principle of the Life Worth Living approach in general, is that it overlooks its own moral hazards. What we are concerned about is the combination of a dizzying array of ideas with a high degree of pedagogical abstemiousness on the part of the educator. This admixture can create almost perfect conditions for those "half-completed" transformations mentioned above—a "question-everything" mentality turned existential disorientation that can leave students unmoored from the value frameworks and communities that had hitherto given their lives meaning. Nicholas Burbules (1990) is particularly insightful on this point:

> We often find, for example, that helping students consider a radically different way of viewing their circumstances involves challenging their incoming pre-conceptions and frameworks of understanding. […] The problem here is that certain ways of viewing the world are invested with enormous significance (religious beliefs are a clear instance), and to challenge these is often to deprive students of an important source of security and significance in their lives. Another instance involves ethnicity, where cultural traits may constitute an impediment to learning; sometimes intentionally, sometimes not, we cause students to question habits and values that tie them to important communities within and outside the school. The losses here are real, and it is not enough to tell oneself that it is for the student's good. (p. 474)

We have quoted this passage in many of our writings on transformation for a simple reason: Burbules simply seems right to us about what is at stake if we want to be about transformation, but are not ready to truly offer students a vision of what is worth transforming *into*.

We are not claiming that developments of this kind are *necessarily* the outcomes we should expect from the Life Worth Living approach, nor are we suggesting that the authors of *Life Worth Living* are unaware of this issue. In fact, they begin their book with a section called "This Book Might Wreck Your Life" and offer various potential supports throughout the book, recommending friendship several times as an important context for pursuing such queries. Nevertheless, we do not think the seriousness of the issue we are raising is quite appreciated. For example, after the heading about how the book can wreck one's life, a description of three individuals follows who, though they faced tremendous hardship and "had their lives wrecked," ultimately became moral heroes: Gautama Buddha, Simon Peter, and Ida B. Wells. The authors write that each of their life stories has something in common: They "share […] an experience that put the shape of their lives into question. What had been normal and assumed became questionable. Something—maybe everything—had to change" (p. xv). Our point is that it is by no means certain that being thrown into such deep existential uncertainty will lead

to moral heroism. In fact, it may lead to the opposite of what the authors want: an enduring aimlessness, an inability to commit to a way of life that can increase their flourishing.

4. Rethinking Teaching for Flourishing

Where does this leave us, then? We believe the Life Worth Living framework, along with others like it, gets us halfway to the goal of transformation. They effectively bring the question of what it means to have a flourishing life into focus, and they provide suggestions of where to begin looking, but they do not provide sufficient support to help students overcome their situatedness in a late-capitalist liberal society. The Western cultural values of individualism and an insistence on radical self-determination have, ironically, conditioned students' conception of flourishing to such a high degree that most students are largely incapable of choosing alternative modes of flourishing. The authors of the Life Worth Living framework maintain that the goal of engaging with the great traditions is to raise questions about how to live: "There aren't many things the great religious traditions and philosophers mostly agree about. It turns out, though that this is one of them: when push comes to shove, the decisive facet of the question is: how should we live?" (p. 120). In our view, however, the great traditions don't *ask us* how we should live; they *inspire us to live a certain way*.

This may seem like a subtle disagreement, but it captures our central concern about the overarching emphasis of the Life Worth Living approach: The authors focus their attention on encouraging young people to ask the right questions, and then insist they answer those questions in light of their own values. The problem is that students' values, and their intuitions about human flourishing in particular, have been profoundly influenced by contemporary Western culture. This culture has systematically conditioned students to prioritize material wealth, social status, individual pleasure, and personal comfort. Aristotle correctly argues that as students habitually pursue such ends, they will inevitably come to love these things and view them as essential components of a good life. As they grow towards adulthood, it becomes increasingly difficult to change their minds by merely exposing them to alternative traditions and asking them questions about their thoughts on those traditions. They have come to love these forms of flourishing and, as a consequence, really struggle to imagine how they could flourish without them at their core. Asking students to *consider* such alternatives is usually not enough to prompt them to want to radically alter their life trajectory for one based on virtue. The Life Worth Living framework instructs students to be mindful of these biases and think critically about them before making their decisions. But, here again, the mode of engagement is *thinking* through their biases. These biases reside in students' hearts and affections, and they will likely remain there unless they are directed towards something else entirely.

This is why we think epiphanies are so central to a transformative education. Students need to be helped to *experience for themselves the beauty and wisdom of the virtues*, not merely shown that certain people within certain (foreign) traditions consider them beautiful and wise. If this is correct, we believe a significant shift in our pedagogical efforts is necessary. It means organizing the classroom experience around inducing dramatic, emotionally-laden moral insights that cause a temporary reorientation of students' motivational structures—in a word, epiphanies. A student who has an epiphany about some moral issue sees the experience as a turning point of (potentially) significant proportions, in the sense that they now recognize a clear desire to live differently (Kristjánsson, 2020, p. 117). In our experience, insights of this sort rarely happen spontaneously, and almost never by simply asking students to reflect on perspectives or ways of life that are foreign to them. In fact, the average student's thinking is normally so conditioned by their cultural milieu that they need to have their current thinking temporarily *bypassed,* as it were, so that they can *feel* the force of the new ideas to be internalized. That is not to say that students will not or should not try to think about the insights they have gained, but rather simply that students' thinking often needs to be *first* inspired by a vision of a new good that they have previously overlooked or discounted before their reflections on the good life can take on meaningful moral substance. Of course, we realize that

our suggestions might seem difficult, impractical, or even impossible. And yet we have tried to show in our work over the years that teachers can follow simple and intuitive instructional steps—employing effective hooks, inspiring emotional appeals, and compelling follow-up tasks—to make such experiences possible in the classroom (Jonas & Yacek, 2025).

The problem, of course, is that creating epiphanies regarding religious traditions is generally antithetical to the values of institutions of learning in liberal democracies, except those that are religious themselves. When students enter a secular school, they do not expect, nor would they desire, their teachers to intentionally favor one religious view over another. However, nearly all schools these days aim not just to form students' intellects, but also to shape their characters as citizens of their society, and indeed, the world. Educators have increasingly recognized that students need to possess certain civic and moral virtues in order to contribute to their own flourishing and the flourishing of others around them. It is here that epiphanies become essential. If educational institutions are earnest in their desire to help form students' ethical characters, they must confront the fact that students' characters have already been formed by the culture around them, and *not* seek their own flourishing or the flourishing of others. In our view, teachers must find a way to help students *want* to cultivate virtues as a route to their own and others' flourishing, even when their previous acculturation encourages them not to develop these virtues.

The Live Worth Living framework does not go far enough to address the problem of the deep embeddedness of students' prior acculturation. They correctly acknowledge that students need to recognize and question the individualism that they have unconsciously adopted, and they recognize the power of traditions for breaking through such an ideology. However, *the pedagogical method* they propose—focused as it is on individual judgment and choice—potentially continues the logic of individualism it tries to avoid and may therefore lead away from the forms of life that are actually worth living. Ironically, this individualistic focus in the larger culture is likely one of the reasons why young people have ceased to take an interest in reflecting on the good life; thus, its presence in the Life Worth Living framework may seriously undermine its stated aims.

In our view, this critique leads back to where we began this paper. If we want to teach for flourishing, then we cannot get around employing transformative methods in the classroom. In the context of flourishing-related decision-making, we believe the questions and ideas recommended by the Life Worth Living framework can be particularly helpful in getting students accustomed to thinking about their lives in broader terms and in foregrounding flourishing as a moral ideal. However, we *also* believe that teachers must assume a special degree of responsibility when addressing students' flourishing directly. It is not enough for them to stand back and conduct a conversation; instead, they should encourage them to make a list of values and consider the consequences of those values. If a vision of a good life and a burgeoning commitment to virtue are to begin growing in students, then it must be the teachers themselves who help reveal this vision and exemplify virtuous commitment and conduct in the classroom.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we argued that teaching for flourishing is a multifaceted pedagogical endeavor, one that requires a diverse array of experiences, forms of engagement, relationships, and reflections. Although programs like the Life Worth Living framework demonstrate a particularly well-adapted and compelling approach to supporting students' flourishing, it turns out that direct inquiry, reflection, and discussion of flourishing-related questions are not quite enough to advance students' flourishing. Teaching for flourishing requires a pedagogy of epiphany, in which teachers help students encounter the wondrous, awe-inspiring, uplifting, and beautiful aspects of the subjects and phenomena they are studying. Moreover, teaching for flourishing requires teachers to embody flourishing themselves: to lay bare how their lives have been enriched, made more meaningful, satisfying, and joyful by their pursuit of virtue and a good human life.

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