

The plural concept of good character

El plural concepto del buen carácter

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Abstract:

Support for character education has been gaining momentum in recent years, invariably in educational circles across the Anglosphere. This paper distinguishes between good character and *buen carácter* and highlights the distinctive features of the two meanings attributed to good character, particularly in Spanish. It undertakes a philological, philosophical and psycho-pedagogical analysis to this end. Moreover, it draws a distinction between temperament and good character and stresses the importance of developing a higher standard for good character, both for oneself and for those in whose hands educational responsibilities are placed. For this purpose, it considers the main human qualities at the heart of good character based on a transcended reading of one of the most prominent representations of Spanish culture, *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*.

Keywords: Difference between good character and *buen carácter*, various meanings of good character, fundamental features of the different meanings, importance of reading *Don Quixote* in the development of good character through education.

Resumen:

El movimiento educativo promotor de la educación del carácter ha ido adquiriendo mayor fuerza últimamente, siempre en el ámbito de la cultura inglesa. En el artículo, se muestran las diferencias entre *good character* y buen carácter, señalando las cualidades que identifican los dos sentidos que, especialmente en español, tiene el buen carácter. Para ello, se hace un análisis filológico, filosófico y psico-pedagógico. Se diferencia entre temperamento y buen carácter y se subraya la importancia por alcanzar un buen carácter en su superior significado, para uno mismo y para las personas sobre quienes se tienen responsabilidades educativas. Se propone una lectura trascendida de *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha*, estudiando las cualidades humanas centrales del buen carácter que allí se descubren, como expresión relevante de la cultura española.

Descriptores: Diferencia entre buen carácter y *good character*, diversos sentidos del buen carácter, cualidades básicas de los diversos sentidos, importancia de la lectura de el *Quijote* para la educación del buen carácter.

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1. Introduction

One of the most acrimonious debates in recent years among academics has centred around freedom of expression, which has frequently been called into question as individuals or associations have been “no-platformed” because their opinions were incompatible with the worldview of others and therefore deemed to be an expression of hate speech. Needless to say, every effort should be made to prevent hate speech. However, we should not forget that university campuses ought to provide a platform where the exchange of different views and beliefs is promoted as that some individuals simply fear the truth and will close down any public debate that strays from the politically correct line, the prevailing ideology that seeks to establish the standard by which the conduct of all citizens is measured.

These ideas have slowly but surely taken hold in educational circles. First of all, the word *virtue* is falling into disuse in conversational language, so much so that Paul Valéry, as director of the Académie Française, stated in his speech of 20 December 1934 at an award ceremony of the Académie: “*ce mot vertu est mort, ou du moins il se meurt*”¹ (this word, *Virtue*, is dead, or at least it is dying) (p. 2). Over time, the concept of *goodness* has steadily been replaced by correctness and has ultimately become *political correctness*.

Yet, educators know that education cannot be restricted exclusively to the confines of scientific knowledge and competence, hence several momentous movements emerged towards the last third of the 20th century to promote moral education, such as those of Kohlberg or Gilligan.

One such movement that has gone from strength to strength is character education which dates back to ancient times but has taken on various forms in recent years. On that basis, we are going to examine our understanding of *good character*. As such, we will consider the English and Spanish meanings of the term character (*carácter*) before examining how it is interpreted from a philosophical and psycho-pedagogical perspective.

We will subsequently reflect on the plural concept of good character before concluding with several proposals in respect of its content, especially through the prism of Spanish culture.

2. Meanings of *carácter* / character in Spanish and English

Carácter (character) derives from the Greek *kharaktés* and originally meant the tool that was used to mark one’s livestock to distinguish it from the herds of others. By consulting the *Dictionary of Real Academia Española* (DRAE) and the *Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (ODCE), it is possible to compare and contrast the meanings of *carácter* and *character*.

The DRAE is clearly more explicit in its treatment of the original meanings of the term *carácter*, since 5 of its definitions concern the mark that is added to a thing, such as the aforementioned brand or tool, or printed markings. On the other hand, only number 5 of the ODCE definition refers to “printed or written letter, etc.”. The first ODCE definition is “collective qualities or characteristics

that distinguish a person or thing". While that definition is more succinct, it is similar to the meaning provided by the DRAE: "*conjunto de cualidades o circunstancias propias de una cosa, de una persona o de una colectividad, que las distingue, por su modo de ser u obrar, de las demás*" (the set of qualities or circumstances of a thing, a person or a group that distinguishes them from others as a result of their way of being or acting).

The ODCE definitions under 2a and 2b are noteworthy: *moral strength* and *reputation, esp. good reputation*. Number 9 of DRAE provides the closest Spanish definition: "*fuerza y elevación de ánimo natural de alguien; firmeza, energía*" (natural strength and loftiness of spirit; steadfastness, energy). The difference is intriguing: while the English definition immediately relates the term with morality, this aspect is non-existent in Spanish, as assertiveness (*firmeza*) can also be exhibited by those who act immorally.

Despite the admission of other less important meanings, the DRAE distinguishes between *carácter heredado* (inherited character), which would denote "each of the functional or anatomical features passed from one generation to the next, in animals and plants", and *carácter adquirido* (acquired character), in reference to features "acquired by the animal in its lifetime". It is clear, therefore, that Spanish associates *heredado* (inherited) with either animals or plants, and *adquirido* (acquired) exclusively with animals. As such, it makes an indirect reference to human beings, as rational animals, whose character is both inherited

and acquired. The "acquired" is non-existent in plants, scarce in irrational animals and abundant in rational animals.

3. The concept of character from a philosophical perspective

We will focus on a pair of pre-eminent authors: Richard Peters, who was a highly influential philosopher of education for many years, on the one hand, and Kant, on the other.

Peters tells us that character takes three forms: the non-committal sense; character as a distinctive style within the character traits of a person; and *having character*, which indicates a firm commitment to certain principles². The relationship between these forms and *good character* is significant. For obvious reasons, it makes little sense to consider good character from a non-committal perspective. On the other hand, in respect of the distinctive style, which is very clearly defined, we should bear in mind that while we are speaking about a *good character* in this case, we may also very well be referring to a fickle or irritable character.

It is a different story in terms of *having character* in so far as we are alluding to a firm commitment to certain principles. In this respect, Peters (1981) refers to Kant's well-known text, which is so important that it is worthy of a brief commentary here.

In his *Anthropology*, Kant states:

To be able to simply say of a human being: "he has a character" is not only to have

said a great deal about him but is also to have praised him a great deal; for this is a rarity, which inspires profound admiration and respect towards him. If by the term 'character' one generally understands that which can be expected of a person, whether good or bad, then one usually adds that he has this or that character; and then the term signifies his way of sensing. But simply to have a character signifies that property of the will by which the subject binds himself to definite practical principles that he has prescribed to himself irrevocably by his own reason. Although these principles may sometimes indeed be false and incorrect, nevertheless the formal element of the will in general, to act according to firm principles (and not to fly off hither and yon, like a swarm of gnats), has something precious and admirable in it; for it is also something rare.

Here it does not depend on what nature makes of the human being, but on what the human being makes of himself; for the former belongs to temperament (where the subject is for the most part passive), and only the latter enables one to recognise that he has a character.

All other good and useful properties of the human being have a price that allows them to be exchanged with other things that have just as much use; talent has a MARKET PRICE, since the sovereign or lord of the manor can use a talented human being in all sorts of ways; — temperament has an AFFECTIVE PRICE; one can have an enjoyable time with such a person, he is a pleasant companion; — but character has an inner WORTH and is beyond all price. (1991)³

This long citation is thought-provoking and emphasises the difference between *price* and *value*, which has since been re-

peated on a frequent basis. Yet, its central argument may raise certain questions. Kant warns that a firm commitment to principles is not yet a definite character, but a disposition favourable to character, for the character requires maxims stemming from reason and moral practical principles. But as this may also raise further questions, Kant concludes by listing the following five negative principles pertaining to character:

Not intentionally to say what is false; consequently, also to speak with caution so that one does not bring upon oneself the disgrace of retraction.

Not to dissemble; appearing well disposed in public but being hostile behind people's backs.

Not to break one's (legitimate) promise, which also includes honouring even the memory of a friendship now broken off, and not abusing later on the former confidence and candour of the other person.

Not to enter into a friendly or familiar association with evil-minded human beings, and, bearing in mind the *noscitur ex socio* etc., to limit the association only to business.

Not to pay attention to gossip derived from the shallow and malicious judgment of others; for paying attention to it already indicates weakness. Also, to moderate our fear of offending against fashion, which is a fleeting, changeable thing; and, if it has already acquired some importance in its influence, then at least not to extent its command into morality. (Id.)⁴

In his conclusion, Kant ends by asserting:

In a word, to have made truthfulness in the inmost recesses of one's acknowledgement to one's self and at the same

time in one's behaviour towards others, one's highest maxim, is a man's sole proof of the consciousness of having a character; and since this is the minimum which can be demanded of a rational man, but at the same time the maximum of inner worth (of human dignity), he must, in order to be a man of principles (to have a definite character), must be possible of the most common human reason, and hence superior to the greatest talent, in point of dignity. (Id.)⁵

We cannot comprehensively analyse these ideas. Kant's proposal of a way of sensing character serves as a basis for Peters's second interpretation of character. Yet, we have already noted that this form does not necessarily fit with the description of *good character*. At this juncture, we shall attempt to determine whether those who *have character*, according to Kant, can also be said to have a *good character*. It goes without saying that truthfulness in the inmost recesses, to the extent that maxims are accepted from reason and moral practical principles, and that a decision is made to apply them to one's behaviour towards others, is meritorious. However, it is debatable whether the most common human reason can discover such maxims and principles, qualified as unquestionable and immutable; nor do the stated negative principles regarding character give us the impression that we are converging on our usual conception of a *good character*.

We have to concede that both authors offer interesting ideas about character. But perhaps they have laid the groundwork for a concept worthy of further investigation:

the plural dimension of the concept of *good character*, for the purposes of which we will also examine psycho-pedagogical perspectives on character.

4. Psycho-pedagogical perspectives on the concept of character

From a psycho-pedagogical perspective, there is usually one practical objective: to analyse reality while engaging in experimental scientific practices, as well as researching the most effective means by which to resolve the issues raised.

If we follow the order of the meanings of the term character in everyday language, the first issue concerns the set of qualities by which a person or a group is distinguished. This raises several problems, including:

- a) Determining the distinctive qualities of the various characters.
- b) Determining how these qualities become part of the personality of individuals or even groups.
- c) The influence of what is not acquired but inherited and the prominence of the role of human freedom in the forging of the character.

No definitive response has been forthcoming to any of these problems.

On the first issue, it would be remiss of us not to consult Gordon Allport who, as Head of the Psychology Department at Harvard University and President of the

American Psychological Association, conducted important research and achieved numerous feats between 1924 and the year of his death in 1967. In 1937, he made his first and most widely recognised contribution to the discipline when his book entitled *Personality: a psychological interpretation* was published. It conducts an important study of each individual's characteristics by analysing thousands of traits relevant to humans. In subsequent years, he published numerous works. In 1990, Goldberg published an article⁶, which has defined his work. In it, he draws on the work of Allport (1937) and Cattell (1943)⁷ and ultimately consolidates the essential factors, which he dubs *The Big-Five*. They have since been repeated *ad nauseum*.

Yet, his model based on character traits — abbreviated as OCEAN — standing for *openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness* and *neuroticism*, has been shrewdly criticised by some, including Kristjánsson who, while acknowledging its practical nature in some respects, asserts “the model suffers from arbitrariness regarding the traits that make us ‘who we are’ in an everyday sense” (2013)⁸, and likewise dismisses that it is redundant to speak of character or virtue, which would be better expressed by the *self-concepts* (*self-esteem, self-regulation and self-efficacy*), as that would considerably undermine the specific virtues to which human beings can aspire.

Finally, personality character traits do not sufficiently reflect a person's personality, for they do not sufficiently justify

the precise actions that he takes, since, as asserted by Zubiri “a human being determines his psychophysical substantiality, and that determination by an appropriation of possibilities is what constitutes his virtue and vice” (1986)⁹.

The second issue is essentially what sets human beings apart from the rest of nature. In his well-known phrase, Ortega y Gasset stated that while the tiger cannot stop being a tiger, cannot be *de-tigered*, man lives in perpetual danger of being dehumanized. This clearly means, on the other hand, that the human being needs to be humanized. In other words, as asserted by Kant in another equally recognisable phrase, whereas man needs man to become a man no any duck needs another duck to learn to swim. On the other hand, it also means that even a person with the best upbringing and education can be dehumanized: we have all seen films where a Nazi officer is looking for Jews hiding in a house and, although he is able to play one of Bach's compositions on the piano located in a living room, it does not stop his soldiers from firing at closets or beds just in case that is where those they pursue have chosen to hide.

This humanization process has a wide range of sources. Some will be random, and are usually promoted informally by the social context, or occur as a result of personal initiatives that have arisen more or less suddenly. Conversely, others will be the result of the person's upbringing or education or the initiative of the person who has hopes of forging a life that is worth living.

Some take the view that all processes must be random, and education should be eschewed in so far as it does not involve the teaching of indisputable scientific facts, in a bid to avoid indoctrination, paternalism or oppression. It should not need to be stated that genuine educational initiatives should guard against indoctrination of any kind (vid. Ibáñez-Martín, 2021)¹⁰. However, viewing the characteristics of human autonomy and the exercise of freedom based on those demands overlooks the human condition and the realities of the teaching profession and takes us on a path that leads nowhere. Another no less popular school of thought posits that the human being is subject to the whims of his temperament or forced to act by social pressure. Ortega y Gasset responded that “We are not predetermined, but we are responsible for the decisions we make and for creating our own path in life” (1964)¹¹, and we are not forced to act by circumstances since they are the options open to us, as indicated previously.

We could continue to analyse this second issue by reflecting briefly on the existence of a personality peculiar to certain groups and its prominence in all group members. The matter is both ancient and contemporary. It is addressed by Plato on two occasions. In *The Republic*, he states that it is individuals who characterise cities, and he refers, for instance, to “the Phoenicians or the inhabitants of Egypt who tend to be prone to greed”.¹² His subsequent position is more complex as, in *Laws*, he recognises that among some people — again in reference to the Phoenicians and Egyptians — meanness reigns

due to the pecuniary habits of their members, but he also asks that

one thing should be remembered about places, and that is that some surpass others in terms of producing better or worse men, and that it is not possible to legislate without first acknowledging this fact. The favourable nature of some will actually depend either on changes in the wind direction, I believe, or on the heat; other determining factors will include water, or the food produced by the earth. Not only are they able to exert a positive or negative influence on physical bodies; but they can also produce the same effects on souls. Of all these kinds of territories, especially distinguished are those which, either due to divine inspiration or because they have been lucky enough to produce men of genius, welcome favourably or unfavourably all those who make those places their home.¹³

But the personality of groups is not exclusive to the ancients, as it remains valid nowadays, as indicated by a number of verses of Miguel Hernández (1938), written at tragic times, in which he describes the peoples of Spain in the following terms:

Asturians of courage/Basques of armoured stone/Valencians of happiness/and Castilians of soul/laboured like the earth/and as graceful as wings;/Andalusians of lightning/born among the guitars/and forged on anvils/flooded with tears/Extramadurans of rye/Galicians of rain and calm/Catalans of firmness/Aragonese of stock/Murcians of dynamite/fruitfully multiplied/Leonese, Navarrese, masters/of hunger, sweat and the axe/kings of mining/lords of the tilled soil.¹⁴

This set of positions is undoubtedly closely related to the third issue that we set out to analyse, that is the influence of the inherited and the prominence of the role of freedom in the forging of one's character. Indeed, experience mysteriously shows how an original set of characteristics affects the members of a group, but, at the same time, we also observe that a clear diversity emerges even between twin brothers who have grown up exposed to the same environment, which gives us the impression that these forms of being and thinking are the sum of a diverse range of inherited attributes, for there are specific genetic inclinations that go hand in hand with those of a more general nature. This inherited attribute is called temperament and is different from character predominantly on account of its origins and entrenchment. Indeed, it has been shown that human freedom, if nurtured properly, can change, according to the degree of effort brought to bear, the temperament and character by which we are distinguished. Zubiri said:

personality is modified in the course of existence, by virtue of which the human being remains the same person without ever being the same, since the human being is constantly regulating and qualifying his personality. (1986)¹⁵

Having presented an overview of character, we will now turn our attentions to the fundamental point, since the first thing that character education should seek to ascertain is when to look for a *good character*.

5. Approaches to the idea of good character

Perhaps our primary task should be to consider the reasons why we talk about *good character*. In Spanish, an adjective is usually employed to qualify or provide information about a noun, so much so that it is placed after the noun, unlike in English where the adjective is placed before, with the exception of poetic language, such as when Machado states: "and the ridiculous helmet/the good Manchego" (1951)¹⁶. But there is no shortage of exceptions to the rule, especially when the order of words changes the meaning (in Spanish, changing the position of the adjective "*buena*", as in the case of *una vida buena* and *una buena vida*, modifies the meaning from living well to a good life, which are not the same thing. Another example is "*pobre*", as in the case of *un pobre hombre* and *un hombre pobre*, where the former means a poor devil and the latter means a poor man) or the speaker wishes to add emphasis to a quality, such as *esta es una buena pintura* (this is a good picture).

As for *good character*, there is no change in meaning in Spanish depending on the order in which the adjective appears relative to the noun. Nor can it be considered that a reference to good character is an attempt by the speaker to be ironic, such as when we say *what a carefully constructed case* despite listening to a speech full of vacuous arguments. In Spanish, perhaps it has become a set combination in which the adjective is placed before the noun, as in the case of free will (*libre albedrío*). Indeed, placing the adjective after the noun (*carácter bueno*) is un-

common, also because character education has been developed in the Anglosphere and it is easy to pass from *good character* to *buen carácter*.

But it seems to me that talk of *buen carácter* can pave the way for us to contemplate the plural concept of good character and the various levels of good character found in Spanish, which differ to varying degrees from their use in English.

We should bear in mind that the second meaning of character in English is *moral strength*, whereas the word *moral* is not included in any Spanish definition of character.

This may serve to explain why English speakers refer to *character education* as a *subset of moral education* (Arthur et al., 2017)¹⁷, so much so that newer presentations of character education relate it to the presence of virtues in the teaching profession. While I consider such a presence to be beyond doubt, an analysis of the uses of *buen carácter* in Spanish give me the impression that a plural concept of *buen carácter* exists and includes different elements in which moral virtues are present and other elements more closely related to the third meaning of *bueno* given by the DRAE: “funny, appetizing, pleasant, amusing”, elements one would not necessarily associate with morality.

One article recently published in the press emphasises the difference between good character and morality:

JRBM was once the most popular mayor among the electorate of his region. He

is now facing charges in court connected with his tobacco smuggling network, which stretched across the US and China. He has always been commonly referred to in his town as Nené. He earned the sympathy of voters as a self-made man - he started as an emigrant in Germany and the Netherlands and, upon his return, set up several businesses - and for the generosity in his treatment of people who were going through difficult times. Money was never an issue when it came to helping out a neighbour to repair a home or cure an ailment. He amassed such power that none of his adversaries were able to lay a glove on him during his 18-year stint as mayor. Nené's is not a story you hear every day. Once a respectable mayor and the most popular among the electorate in his region in Galicia, he is now infamous for his ties to smuggling and drug trafficking, and faces charges in connection with his tobacco smuggling network, which was active in Portugal, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Croatia, the United States and the United Kingdom, among others. (Puga, 2022)¹⁸

Everybody said Nené had a *good character*: he earned the sympathy of people, he was generous, he helped those in need and judging by photographs of him, he seems a well-mannered, modest and calm person. But he did not set a moral example. Not only did he undermine the common good by devoting his time to tobacco smuggling, but he was also involved in the drug smuggling business, without giving a second thought as to the misfortune his activities would inflict on the lives of so many.

It seems to me that the list of positive character traits indicated above describes the first level of good character and is not too dissimilar to the way in which

Don Quixote is described as he nears the end of his life. The narrator says he “was always of a gentle disposition and kindly in all his ways, and hence he was beloved, not only by those of his own house, but by all who knew him” (Cervantes*, book II, c. 74)¹⁹. According to the definition given by the DRAE, *gentle* refers to a calm and good-tempered condition, that is to say with strength, energy and serene courage to overcome difficulties and face risks.

But the concept of good character is evidently plural since there is a “higher standard” above and beyond that which we have described in this paper. It manifests itself when the mature education of good character is promoted, where all consolidated and stable habits of human excellence arise harmoniously. That is nothing new: it is intriguing to read Marcus Aurelius** who lists a number of attributes that make up one’s character in his book entitled *Meditations*, starting in Book I with the assertion that he learned “from my grandfather Verus good morals and the government of my temper”²⁰.

This higher standard is expressed by Lickona who states:

Good character consists of knowing the good, desiring the good and doing the good habits of the mind, habits of the heart, and habits of action. All three are necessary for leading a moral life; all three make up moral maturity. (2001)²¹

We may find these words discouraging. Are we able to identify the *unconditional* goodness that we should exhibit even if it costs us our lives?

A plethora of philosophical responses has certainly been developed, and it makes little sense to think that everyone has the capacity to analyse the various theories of the great thinkers. Which is why the following remarks of MacIntyre are particularly interesting:

In stories, in contrast to theories, the universal is only found in and through the particular. What we need are stories that impel us to transcend them – even if everything subsequently runs counter to the direction in which we are supposed to be headed. Many places transcend themselves and point to the theories we actually need: folk tales, the dramas of Sophocles and Shakespeare and, in particular, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*; such examples take us beyond and towards the kind of theoretical understanding provided by St Thomas’s commentaries on *Ethics* and *Politics*.

One of the most urgent things to learn, first from narration and subsequently from theory, is that he who develops his character badly is less and less capable of understanding what he has misunderstood and how he has made such an error: part of the evil of the villain is intellectual blindness in moral questions. (1993)²²

While MacIntyre does not cite Cervantes, he does allude to Shakespeare, a contemporary of Cervantes, albeit from another culture which is as worthy as ours to highlight the best of certain human qualities. However, since my upbringing was influenced chiefly by Spanish culture, when I reflect on the higher standard of good character, Don Quixote naturally springs to mind, although it does not escape my attention that he occasionally

lacked the fundamental virtue of prudence, as he acknowledges when he is at death's door: "My reason is now free and clear, rid of the dark shadows of ignorance that my unhappy constant study of those detestable books of chivalry cast over it" (Cervantes, 1994).²³

Therefore, based on a comprehensive analysis of *Don Quixote*, I submit that the higher standard of *good character* comprises the following attributes. We will focus on seven groups with the most pertinent attributes, without claiming to cite every single feature included in all 116 chapters of both parts of *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*:

1. *Courage and magnanimity*

Even at the beginning of the story, Don Quixote is willing to confront a "lusty" farmer, with a horse and a lance, who was flogging a boy stripped from the waist upwards. He was not told by another to approach that farmer who was probably stronger than him, and perhaps had his reasons for flogging the boy. But "in an angry voice" he calls on him to fight "I will make you know that you are behaving as a coward" (Cervantes, 1994).

But then comes the episode of the windmills which combines courage and illusion. The previous boy was real. However, confusing large windmills for giants, and engaging them in combat, epitomises bravery — to Sancho he says, "if thou art afraid, away with thee out of this and betake thyself to prayer" (I, c. 8) — with the illusion of embarking on an honourable adventure.

Sometimes we overlook adventure and magnanimity, remaining in an apathetic state of egoism. That could not be said of Lindbergh who, in 1927, became the first man to fly from New York to Paris, or of Hernán Cortés as he came face to face with the Aztec Empire, or of Malala Yousefzai, a Pakistani activist who began, at the age of 11, to campaign for girls' right to education and eventually received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014 at the age of 17. That is also absent from Don Quixote who considers it his duty to continue doing that for which he is responsible, as he says to Don Diego

it was my bounden duty to attack those lions that I just now attacked, although I knew it to be the height of rashness; for I know well what valour is, that it is a virtue that occupies a place between two vicious extremes, cowardice and temerity; but it will be a lesser evil for him who is valiant to rise till he reaches the point of rashness, than to sink until he reaches the point of cowardice; for, as it is easier for the prodigal than for the miser to become generous, so it is easier for a rash man to prove truly valiant than for a coward to rise to true valour. (II, 17)

2. *Serenity and good-tempered*

For us, Don Quixote personifies the strength and energy that are needed to overcome difficulties and problems, always in the interest of justice, which is why he advises Sancho, upon being appointed governor of an island, that it is the duty of justice to discover the truth and that "if perchance thou permittest the staff of justice to swerve, let it be not by the weight of a gift, but by that of mercy" (II, 42).

However, it should be noted that serenity is closely related to patience. Indeed, life inevitably throws an abundance of adversity our way and we would do well to embrace it in a good-tempered manner, while remembering that the obsession to get our own way is a very childish instinct, also because some matters will need time to develop. In reference to Don Quixote, the bachelor Sansón Carrasco said

your worship alone bears away the palm from all the knights-errant for (all) have taken care to set before us your gallantry, your high courage in encountering dangers, your fortitude in adversity, your patience under misfortunes as well as wounds. (II, 3)

3. *Benevolence and empathy*

The narrator of *The Ingenious Gentleman* states that Don Quixote was “ready to please everybody”, and, shortly afterwards, Don Quixote states that his desire was to bring to life again the defunct knight-errantry, having “carried out a great portion of my design, succouring widows, protecting maidens, and giving aid to wives, orphans, and minors” (II, 16). Good character is related to the desire to seek goodness in others, to be sensitive to the problems they face and to show an understanding of and interest in people.

4. *Humility and simplicity*

Life is beset by a number of widespread evils including envy, anger or bitterness, pride, vanity and contempt for others. Conversely, Don Quixote is heard saying to Sancho “who humbleth himself God exalteth” (I, 11); in much the same way, the

Curate is told “where envy reigns virtue cannot live” (I, 47).

It is easier to be humble if one follows the old principle of knowing oneself, as Don Quixote reminds Sancho “the most difficult thing to know that the mind can imagine. If thou knowest thyself, it will follow thou wilt not puff thyself up like the frog that strove to make himself as large as the ox” (II, 42). Simplicity and an aversion to listening to oneself or ostentation are other expressions of humility.

5. *Tenderness and courtesy*

These attributes characterise the consideration for others, both in terms of the affable manner in which one addresses them and the care one takes in one’s appearance, in view of the requirements of the position or the specifics of the situation in question.

Don Quixote asks the poor gentleman to be “affable, well-bred, courteous, gentle-mannered, and kindly, not haughty, arrogant, or censorious, but above all by being charitable” (II, 6). On the other hand, he instructs Sancho “go not ungirt and loose, Sancho; for disordered attire is a sign of an unstable mind (ant. loose, slack, unkempt)” (II, 43). And he then says “thou shouldst array thyself in the apparel thy office requires, and that at the same time it be neat and handsome” (II, 51).

6. *Gratitude and relationship with God*

It cannot be said that someone who believes that everyone else should be at their

beck and call has a good character, without being able even to reciprocate upon being received with a smile in a store. On the other hand, we read that Don Quixote says to the innkeeper: "I shall preserve for ever inscribed on my memory the service you have rendered me in order to tender you my gratitude while life shall last me" (I, 16).

Yet, Don Quixote also asserts

ingratitude is the daughter of pride, and one of the greatest sins we know of; and he who is grateful to those who have been good to him shows that he will be so to God also who has bestowed and still bestows so many blessings upon him. (II, 51)

Throughout his masterpiece, Cervantes leaves us in no doubt that the reward of virtue is eternal, for

I know that the path of virtue is very narrow, and the road of vice broad and spacious; I know their ends and goals are different, for the broad and easy road of vice ends in death, and the narrow and toilsome one of virtue in life, and not transitory life, but in that which has no end. (II, 6)

7. *Temperance*

In times of rampant consumerism, which is particularly wretched given the prominence of poverty that blights so many communities both distant and local alike, it can be striking to read a Roman Emperor declaring

I am thankful to the gods (...) that I preserved the flower of my youth, and that I did not make proof of my virility before the proper season, but even deferred the time;

that I was subjected to a ruler and a father who was able to take away all pride from me, and to bring me to the knowledge that it is possible for a man to live in a palace without wanting either guards or embroidered dresses, or torches and statues, and such-like show; but that it is in such a man's power to bring himself very near to the fashion of a private person, without being for this reason either meaner in thought, or more remiss in action, with respect to the things which must be done for the public interest in a manner that befits a ruler. (Marcus Aurelius)²⁴

While temperance moderates human desire by subjecting it to reason, it also adds an element of sobriety and continence to our actions that paves the way to a degree of happiness that can never be experienced by those with an obsession for ephemeral pleasures whose effect invariably leaves them feeling disgruntled.

In much the same way as Marcus Aurelius, Don Quixote appeals for temperance. He calls upon Sancho to

be moderate in thy sleep; for he who does not rise early does not get the benefit of the day; issues a warning "remember, Sancho, diligence is the mother of good fortune, and indolence, its opposite, never yet attained the object of an honest ambition. (II, 43)

and shows him the importance of eating and dining in moderation "more sparingly still; for the health of the whole body is forged in the workshop of the stomach. Be temperate in drinking, bearing in mind that wine in excess keeps neither secrets nor promises" (II, 43); and stresses

let it not be seen that thou art (even if perchance thou art, which I do not believe) covetous, a follower of women, or a glutton; for when the people and those that have dealings with thee become aware of thy special weakness they will bring their batteries to bear upon thee in that quarter, till they have brought thee down to the depths of perdition. (II, 51)

While the list of attributes that we have offered does not represent all the attributes that constitute a good character, those we have indicated perhaps form the basic nucleus of the second definition of good character, where consolidate and stable habits of human excellence arise harmoniously, which is so important in the pursuit of happiness.

Evidently, as Don Quixote informs us, we are aware that any human quality needs to be moderated by a sense of prudence, which corresponds with what is usually defined as “the right reason applied to practice”.

6. Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to highlight the concept of *good character*, which is perhaps more varied in Spanish than in English, by determining the various levels one might encounter in the use of these terms and setting out the basic elements of each of them, based on a philological, philosophical and psycho-pedagogical analysis.

Finally, I think it appropriate to conclude with three fundamental caveats:

- a) *Tener carácter* (to have a character) is undoubtedly linked to a number of principles, whereas temperament refers to realities inherited by the person, which also play a prominent role. But we should bear in mind that, as long as we remain resolute, we can influence and change those realities, and we should also seek to promote educational practices that set out to develop the good character of those who, in one way or another, depend on us. At times, we find comfort in saying that we cannot change because *that's just the way we are*, while forgetting that, in these cases, *research will be needed to determine how we can further develop our nature*. Let us not forget that bitterness towards nature is poisonous, and it is naive to seek a quick fix, since such measures, rather than cultivating, can destroy the improvements we need, albeit in a slow and laborious manner.
- b) The fuel powering our internal engine is love, the feeling of being loved; it takes a considerable effort to cultivate a loving relationship that is strong enough to stand the test of time and cope with setbacks, although that effort is greatly facilitated if we find an answer to fundamental questions about our existence, which will help us to fill any existential vacuum and infuse our hearts with joy.
- c) By focusing on educational initiatives, we will soon discover that the most important thing is to put others on the right track and help them to forge a life that is worth living.

Notes

* The translations offered of the texts by Miguel de Cervantes are taken from: *The Project Gutenberg Etext of Don Quixote by Miguel de Cervantes [Saavedra]*, translated by John Ormsby, PG Etext 996, 1997, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/996/996-h/996-h.htm>.

** The translations offered of the texts by Marcus Aurelius are taken from: (2020) *The Meditations*, translated by George Long, <http://classics.mit.edu/Antoninus/meditations.html>.

¹ Valery, P. (1934, December 20). Rapport sur les prix de vertu [Virtue prize report], p. 2. www.academie-francaise.fr/rapport-sur-les-prix-de-vertu-1934

² Peters, R. S. (1981). *Moral development and moral education*. Allen & Unwin.

³ Kant, I. (1991). Del carácter como índole moral [Character as a moral nature]. In *Antropología* (pp. 238-239). Alianza.

⁴ Id, pp. 240-241.

⁵ Id, p. 242.

⁶ Goldberg, L. R. (1990). An alternative description of personality. The Big-Five factor structure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 59 (6), 1216-1229.

⁷ Cattell, R. B. (1943). The description of personality: Basic traits resolved into clusters. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 38 (4), 476-506.

⁸ Kristjánsson, K. (2013). Ten myths about character, virtue and virtue education. Plus three well-founded misgivings. *British Journal of Education Studies*, 61 (3), pp. 273-274.

⁹ Zubiri, X. (1986). *Sobre el hombre [About the man]*. Alianza, p. 440.

¹⁰ About this subject vid.: La enseñanza de la filosofía y el cultivo de la inteligencia. Una segunda mirada al Sentido Crítico y al Adoctrinamiento [Teaching philosophy and cultivating intelligence. A second look at Critical Thinking and Indoctrination]. **revista española de pedagogía**, 79 (278), 33-50.

¹¹ Ortega y Gasset, J. (1964). *Historia como sistema [History as a system]*. Obras Completas, vol. VI, 6th ed. Revista de Occidente, p. 13.

¹² Platón. *La República [The Republic]*, 436 a.

¹³ Platón. *Las Leyes [The Laws]*, 747 d-e.

¹⁴ Hernández, M. (1938). *Vientos del pueblo nos llevan [Winds of the people carry us]*. <https://www.poemas-del-alma.com/miguel-hernandez-vientos-del-pueblo-me-llevan-htm>

¹⁵ Blázquez, N. (2014). Conferencia de Xavier Zubiri para la historia [Xavier Zubiri's lecture for history]. *Studium*, 54 (3), 433.

¹⁶ Machado, A. (1951). A don Miguel de Unamuno [To Miguel de Unamuno]. In Manuel & Antonio Machado. *Obras completas*, Plenitud, p. 853.

¹⁷ Arthur, J., Kristjánsson, K., Harrison, T., Sanderse, W. & Wright, D. (2017). *Teaching Character and Virtue in Schools*. Routledge, pp. 18-33.

¹⁸ *El Mundo*, October 7, 2022. Nené, el contrabandista de tabaco que movía un negocio de 72 millones desde el sillón de alcalde [Nené, the tobacco smuggler who ran a 72 million business from the mayor's chair].

¹⁹ Cervantes, M. de. *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*, book II, c. 74.

²⁰ Marcus Aurelius (2020). *Meditations*, book I, no 1. It is interesting to observe that while the English translation says *good morals*, in the Spanish translation says *buen carácter*.

²¹ Lickona, T. (2001). What is good character? And how can we develop it in our children. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 9 (4), 239-251.

²² MacIntyre, A. (1993). Persona corriente y filosofía moral. Reglas, virtudes y bienes [Ordinary people and moral philosophy. Rules, virtues and goods]. *Convivium*, 5, pp. 69-70.

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²³ Cervantes, o.c. II, c. 74.

²⁴ Marco Aurelio, o. c., book I, no 17.

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