New digital virtues or virtues for the digital context. Do we need a new model of character education?*

Nuevas virtudes digitales o virtudes para el contexto digital: ¿es necesaria una nueva educación del carácter?

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Abstract:

No one questions the fact that technology has colonized various aspects of our lives. We make use of technology in our work in a great variety of professional fields, in establishing our social relationships or in order to look for on-the-spot information. This new digital world generates different reactions, which del range from pessimism arising from the risks provoked by a certain confusion, perplexity and, at times moral blockage, to an optimistic outlook based on the possibilities the digital world offers for human development. This article is centred at the intersection of these two viewpoints and aims to examine whether the digital world demands a new paradigm of virtues — a substantial change — or whether it simply requires an updating of the classical pattern of virtues to the new circumstances produced by technological change. The article will set out some of the principal characteristics which are provoked by the almost total presence of technology in our lives and will focus on the virtue of critical thinking, which has become especially necessary in view of problems of *infoxication*, *post-truth* or the more and more common methods of online fraud and abuse. After analysing these aspects and the limits of technology and of the digital paradigm, we argue that in the present-day context there are no elements which are incompatible with the classical conception of the virtues. It is certainly true that new challenges will emerge in character education in view of students' immersion in the use of IT and that this situation will mean that certain virtues will require special reappraisal; such will

be the case of critical thought, responsibility and the protection of privacy. However, there is no reason to suppose that the pillars of Aristotelian ethics have been in any way altered or have become obsolete. We defend the idea that an updating and adjustment to a demanding new context is preferable to any really substantial change, since the foundation and objectives of the ethics of virtue remain unchanged in the digital world.

Keywords: character, moral education, critical thinking, virtue, *cyber-flourishing*, digitalization.

Resumen:

Nadie cuestiona el hecho de que la tecnología ha colonizado diversas esferas de nuestra vida. Recurrimos a ella para trabajar en los campos más variados, para establecer relaciones sociales o para buscar información de manera inmediata. Este nuevo mundo digital suscita diversas perspectivas que van desde el pesimismo ante los riesgos que entraña cierta confusión, perplejidad y, en ocasiones, bloqueo moral, a la postura optimista por la posibilidad de un nuevo modo de desarrollo humano o plenitud digital. El presente artículo se sitúa en esta encrucijada y examina si este mundo digital demanda un nuevo paradigma de virtudes –un cambio sustancial–, o si por el contrario se trataría más bien de adecuar el esquema de virtudes clásicas a la nueva realidad tecnológica. Para ello, se exponen algunas de las características principales que provoca la presencia casi total de la tecnología en nuestra vida, y se sitúa el foco en la virtud del pensamiento crítico, que se plantea como especialmente necesaria ante fenómenos como la *infoxicación*, la *posverdad* o los cada vez más comunes métodos de fraude y abuso *online*. Tras analizar estos aspectos y los límites de la tecnología y del paradigma digital, se argumenta que no hay elementos en el contexto actual que resulten incompatibles con la ética clásica de las virtudes. Ciertamente, emergerán retos concretos para educar el carácter en la situación digital de los estudiantes y esta situación supondrá revalorizar algunas de las virtudes de manera particular, como sucede con el pensamiento crítico, la responsabilidad o el cuidado de la intimidad. Sin embargo, no hay nada que permita afirmar que los pilares de la ética aristotélica se hayan visto alterados o queden obsoletos. Se defiende la idea de una adecuación con la mirada puesta en un demandante contexto, antes que de un cambio realmente sustancial, pues el fundamento y el objetivo de la ética de la virtud siguen siendo igualmente válidos para el mundo digital actual.

Descriptores: carácter, educación moral, pensamiento crítico, virtud, *cyber-flourishing*, digitalización.

Sors salutis
et virtutis
mihi nunc contraria
est affectus
et defectus
semper in angaria.
Hac in hora

sine nora
cordum pulsum tangite;
quod per sortem
sternit fortem,
mecum omnes plangite![1]
O Fortuna – *Carmina Burana*

1. Introduction: substantial change or adaptation to a new reality

Batavia is the old name of modern day Jakarta and was also the destination and name of a Dutch galleon loaded with treasures belonging to the East India Company, which foundered on the reefs of the Indian Ocean near the coast of Australia in the seventeenth century. On board the ill fated vessel was an apothecary, Jeronimus Cornelisz, whose advanced education and brilliant eloquence did not impede him, but rather spurred him to lead an authentic massacre and months-long subjection of the 300 survivors — many of them children — who managed to reach the shores of a tiny islet known as Beacon Island. Sexual violence and death were the predominant keynotes of a terrifying story in which the sole motives seemed to be the pleasure of sadistic enjoyment, the desire of absolute dominion and the apparent impunity of the perpetrators. Described in novels by Leys (2011) and Fitzsimons (2020), this story is the starting point of a recent and disturbing book entitled *Evil online*, by the Dutch professors Cocking and van den Hoven (2018), in which the islet of the atrocities and the present day digital environment are compared. The singular characteristics of the two scenarios involve a new reality which bears the stamp of apparent isolation and impunity, and which produces the effect of creating enormous moral confusion in which the voice of conscience can hardly, if at all, be heard. In order to reinforce their introduction to the argument, the authors recall the senseless attack on a web page which had been created to help people who suffer from epilepsia, to which the hackers added a number of images with strong flashing lights, knowing well the harm which these images would cause people who suffer from this condition and who go to precisely these pages in search of help.

It is significant to observe that after years of euphoria and optimism, the voices which today warn against the dangers of the digital world are no longer isolated instances; more and more voices, like Cocking and van den Hoven (2018), describe the new technological environment as "a new economic order which claims for itself human experience as the gratuitous raw material to be used for any number of covert commercial practices" (Zuboff, 2020, p. 9) — a parasitical logic based on behavioural changes in the human person which are without precedent in human nature and which threaten human nature itself, fundamental rights, market democracy and the sovereignty of the people (Vid. Carr, 2004; Morozov, 2012).

On the other hand, authors such as Harrison (2021) defend the possibility of *cyber-flourishing* starting from a revised, adapted and perhaps even digitalized type of character education, with the appearance of new virtues such as *Cyber-wisdom* or new ways of living in society and democratically when we become *cyber-citizens*. Indeed, digitalization signals a new stage, a qualitative change in the understanding of concept. Whereas the analogical refers to different positions sharing a common base, the digital expresses a new category, differ-

ent from what has been traditional, of the way in which human intelligence is used.

Nonetheless, in reference to this new digital environment in which we live, we may well ask: is the classical model of virtues still valid? — the model on which our teaching is based and which was renovated by the neo-Aristotelian tendencies of the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries? A model whose comeback was aided by the resurgence of the ethics of virtue in the works of Anscombe (1958) and which helped in the understanding and development of moral education (Curren, 2015), has given birth to a renewed and hope-inspiring version of character education (Walker et al., 2015). Or, on the other hand, are we to consider this paradigm to be obsolete, out of date and antiquated so shortly after its resurgence? And therefore, should it be shackled and thrown into the technological abyss which is opening up in front of us? Should it be not only renewed or recycled, but even reinvented or substituted? Using the terminology of the Greek philosopher, should we be thinking in terms of a substantial change?

In short, the central discussion contained in this article could be set out in the following terms:

– On the one hand, do we need to be thinking of *new virtues,* which would constitute a *substantial change* in the way we educate and affect the very aims of education, leading us to speak of a different and renewed idea of education in general and character education in particular? This could even lead us to a new concept of the person, in the wake of the promising but disquieting theories of transhumanism (Bostrom, 2005), which, in anthropological terms, differentiate between the task of educating and its ultimate meaning, inasmuch as the ethics of virtue in an education of a neo-Aristotelian character are described not so much as certain norms or principles but as the possibilities of human potential (Massini-Correas, 2019).

– On the other hand, are we thinking more in terms of an adaptation to the new discoveries regarding human intelligence, retaining the most essential and characteristic elements of classical education, but accepting the advisability of rethinking certain known virtues or of prioritizing certain known virtues over others, while giving attention to the new necessities created by the technological context — all of which amounts to a *relevant change* in the way we view our work as educators.

2. New ways of doing, being and educating

There can be no doubt that, thanks to technology, our habits have changed in a relatively short time over the last few years. In Aristotelian terms this could signify a transformation of the human being. A forceful idea in the thought

of the Greek philosopher is that *we are what we do*, or, to put it another way, we become by doing — our actions and behaviours shape us for good or for bad. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* the author clearly explains that the person who assiduously practices generosity is very likely to become a generous person, and conversely the person who lies habitually is at risk of becoming a liar. In his own words (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./2007)

> In the same way, by doing things justly we become just, and by living temperately we become temperate, and by doing brave things we become brave […] And the same thing happens with the virtues, because in our dealings with men we become just or unjust; and in situations of danger in which some fear and others dare, some become heroes and others cowards. Likewise with covetousness and anger, some become temperate and mild while others become dissolute and corrupted according to their acts. To conclude with a principle: habits are established through acts (1103a-1103b).

What is more, although these changes are not irreversible, they do not occur instantaneously; by their very nature: they require repeated actions over time, not single but habitual actions that occur in everyday life. It would be questionable to state that we have the habit of doing something if we do it, even with regularity, every so often. In other words, a person who goes out to run once a month could hardly describe himself as a runner, or a person who goes to a certain restaurant every two years call himself a regular customer; a habit requires greater assiduity and frequency. Consequently, we are not

defined, or at least not significantly, by those actions which we carry our occasionally.

In this sense, the following features, among others, are characteristic of the way that technology has become part of our lives. One of the principal influences of technology in our daily existence is in the fields of time and space. It is true to say that we do not tend to use technology sporadically in these fields; we use it frequently and habitually, to such an extent that it has become a natural part of the repertoire of our usual daily behaviour; for this reason, we could affirm that the use of technology defines us as human beings since it is one of our habits. In the words of Cocking and van den Hoven (2018, p. 33), "The World Wide Web now significantly defines the way that we lead our lives". In addition, we share not only our time but also our space with digital devices: we no longer need to go to a specific place to access technology because it has expanded and become so generalized that our technological devices accompany us and share and inhabit our own personal space. They go almost everywhere with us as *wearable* technology, on our wrists, in our pockets or in our wallets. We use technology so much that it has become almost unconscious and involuntary, rather like the way we don't think about changing gear in our cars; we check our smart phones regularly or we hit the keyboard of our computer in a similar way to the way we blink or breathe. Perhaps the most telling proof of all this is the effect we feel when we are deprived of the technology which we use habitually

and on which we base our daily behaviour — the sensation that something essential in our life is missing. In this sense, almost a decade has passed since we began hearing the term "nomophobia" (an abbreviation of the English term "no-mobile-phone-phobia"), to refer precisely to "the discomfort, the anxiety, the unease and the distress caused by not being in contact with a mobile phone" (Bragazzi & Del Puente, 2014, p. 156). This makes almost unimaginable the possibility of a digital reversal, that is, reverting to a non-digital world.

In addition to this, the areas of human experience into which digital technology has become integrated are in no way marginal, specialized or restricted to a reduced sector of the population. The relatively small economic cost and the ease of use of modern day technology means that it is within easy reach of almost everybody — at least in Western societies — and at the same time technology is not limited to use in the workplace, but is to a large extent personal and used in a wide variety of human activities. Technology has thus become an important element of leisure time, that part of our time which is less instrumental and more unstructured and has a value of its own (Pieper, 1974; Fuentes, 2017): it has its own specific value which does not depend on anything but itself and for this reason it becomes a more radical and permanent feature of human behaviour. What is done for its own sake is generally unaffected by other factors. In this sense, we may well think that technology is no longer just *a means to*, a work tool whose use ends at the end of the working day or the productive activity involved; on the contrary, its place is neither peripheral nor instrumental but at the centre of the most personal.

It has become part of our social relationships, including the most private and valuable for the character of the human being, those which are based on friendship and love, and even on solitude. Technology intervenes, at least partially, in many elements of those interpersonal relationships by means of interpersonal channels of expression and communication. The insufferable picture of a group of friends or family members together in which all eyes are concentrated on their mobile phones and no word is spoken, as if all were in the grip of a false idea of solitude and were taking refuge from the company of the others on their mobile devices, is a cruel reflection of the digital beings in which we appear to have been transformed. But, paradoxically, this apparent digital solitude does not measure up to authentic solitude, which has an instructive value, which confronts the individual with himself, which permits an intimate, intra-personal encounter in which the individual can listen to his heart and discover within himself the transforming impetus and motivation to write or rewrite his own history. To be more specific, García Morente (1935) seems almost prophetically to describe the *solitary* relationship of the individual with his electronic device when he states that:

> Our life today is a life extroverted, a life lived outside itself, in the open air of advertising. And in a parallel way, in the manner

of an instance of reciprocal penetration, advertising and the exterior invades the innermost corners of our personal lives through the thousand holes we have deliberately opened (p. 9).

Transversally, from the private to the public, from the individual to the social, the digital transformation has also taken place in the commons and in the configuration of present day democracies, in matters pertaining to the very exercise of citizenship (Gozálvez et al., 2019). Usage of the digital media and presence in virtual discussion forums have today become a priority for political parties, while the social movements in different parts of the world over the last decade owe their development to a large extent to technology and the internet (Castells, 2015).

In the academic world, technology has also predetermined the way in which research is carried out and it is the means to know what is happening worldwide and to relate to society García-Gutiérrez and Ruiz-Corbella, 2020), inasmuch as it has provided exponentially increased access to information, reducing costs and the time necessary not only to obtain texts but also to distribute their publication in a variety of different formats. As Cocking and van den Hoven (2018) explain, if we take into account all the written production in the history of humanity, from the Egyptian papyri and the Sumerian clay tablets to the present, we will find that 90% of the total has been produced in the last two years. This has meant that researchers have had to be much more discerning in their search for information and selection of contents; along with other factors, this superabundance of information has led some to raise questions regarding the very significance of academic life, such as: does it make sense to continue publishing today when the very abundance of published material means that most of it will never be read? (Burbules, 2020).

In view of this, it seems logical to consider that we are not faced with a superficial or anecdotal matter whose effects are felt by a limited number of individuals, but that we are faced with a problem which: 1) affects practically the whole population, and 2) occurs transversally in essential spheres and facets of human life and not on a sporadic basis but in our day to day life, and which therefore may originate new ways of being and of relating to one another and to the rest of the world. If this context, therefore, makes new ways of being possible, it is reasonable to also speak of new ways of educating and of research in education. In this regard, it is significant that authors such as Jonas (1985), referring to technology in general, and Burbules y Callister (2000), referring to technology in education, argue that the new media can give birth to new objectives to which we can aspire and, consequently, to new abilities and virtues in which to educate.

To address this question, we intend to analyse critical thinking or critical spirit as an example of a specific virtue of a clearly intellectual nature; under various names or headings, it usually appears in the list of virtues or features which are

considered desirable in the formation of character and it has been considered to be "one of the most important skills needed in the coming years", according to *World Economic Forum* (2020, p. 5).

2.1. Adjectified critical thinking

We can define critical thinking as a type of logical thinking which helps us to interpret and make sense of the world (Doddington, 2007), which is based and founded on reasons (Siegel, 1988) derived from principles or criteria (Lipman 1991), to carry out evaluations and express opinions which lead us to adopt a position (Ibáñez-Martín, 1991), thus forming our beliefs, perceptions, behaviours and feelings.

The majority of these authors, who are considered as reference points in the study of critical thinking, analysed this virtue before the end of the previous millennium, when the technological revolution and the internet were still in their infancy; the various concepts which they define cannot therefore be considered as belonging to a digital context. Perhaps for this reason and without wishing to question the value of their ideas, it could be said that their conclusions fall short in terms of a virtual environment or that they fail to take into account the characteristics which define such an environment and differentiate it from the physical world.

Critical thinking implies that the thinker has all the information necessary to express an opinion; in a virtual environment it also implies that he has the added competency in the use of *hardware* and *software*, that he needs to be aware of the

different sources available which flourish in new and different places and in a variety of languages, and at the same time that he is mindful of a new and negative extreme which is difficult to imagine in an analogical environment – that is, what has been termed *infoxication* (Fundéu de la RAE, 2012), or difficulties in processing an excess of information on any given topic which saturate or overload the processes of cognitive assimilation and therefore hamper or impede the process of comprehension. In this sense, it is significant to observe the number of people who abandon the social networks due to the pressure they receive from the virtual community and the enormous expectations placed on them. Cases which come to mind include Simone Biles, the American gymnast, the Dutch cyclist Tom Dumoulin or the Japanese tennis player Naomi Osaka: they all had to face serious anxiety problems because of the difficulty of coping with the pressure from exposure to millions of followers which reached them directly through the social networks; in addition, we should not forget the influence of the *haters* — those who confuse a critical spirit with the desire to destroy the other.

This new conception of critical thinking also implies learning how to distinguish between the truth and *post-truth*. Internet is the perfect seed ground for post-truth, the spreading of *fake news* and hoaxes. It feeds on conspiracy theories, fantastic beliefs and populist and sensationalist fantasies. Although such beliefs have always been one of the tools of social influence, the creation of opinion and at times sheer

manipulation (Pina Polo, 2019), their reach and their efficacy has been greatly multiplied by contemporary technology (Caro, 2015). This is why the role of the educator today is much more important than that of one who simply expresses truths to his students; his task is much more complex since he must enable them to recognize truth as such in an ocean of meticulously prepared messages which have been conceived and designed to suit the characteristics of the receiver, taking into account the way he uses internet, his habits, interests, preferences, geographical location, gender and more (Conroy, 2020; Jackson, 2019). He must therefore be able to resist and manage a type of commercial advertising without precedent due to its ultra-personalization, or what, in the words of Zuboff (2020, p. 36), is nothing less than "a way to camouflage a series of aggressive extraction operations which exploit the innermost corners of life as if they were a mine": hyper-abundant advertising, with an implicitly produced symbolic impact (Gozálvez et al., 2022), based on researched strategies of neuro-marketing and on intensive vigilance of commercialized human experiences and the creation of needs in the name of "the rhetoric of the empowering role of the web" (Zuboff, 2020, p. 24), or even the more and more sophisticated types of attempted fraud such as *Phishing*, *Smishing* or *Vishing*. All this is accompanied by a number of external determinants which weaken critical vision: the dizzying speed and instantaneousness of internet, which triggers decisions and behaviours, or the individual use of technology with clearly social ramifications, which in the case of

adolescents lacks sufficient parental supervision due to factors such as the digital generation gap (Sánchez Pérez, & Fuentes, 2021; Muñoz-Rodríguez et al., 2020). The net result is a growing problem for those involved in moral education, since, as Randall explains:

> Moral habituation, like habituation in any complex skill, must consequently be guided by someone who can provide an articulated understanding of what is to be done and why, a language that directs attention to salient particulars and formulates relevant considerations through which the student can understand what she is doing and why (Curren 2015, p. 467).

Together with critical thinking, we could consider other classical virtues or features of character which are also particularly challenged by the characteristics of the digital environment and which come to mean new demands that were not present in the traditional analogue context. In effect, technological responsibility (Hernández et al., 2015), caution regarding privacy online and cyber-wisdom (Dennis, & Harrison, 2020), trans-media creativity, or digital citizenship are but a few examples of areas requiring a similar analysis in order to be able to confront possible transformations in character education in virtual environments.

3. Character education suited to digital environments

In spite of all that has been said, we can nonetheless find arguments which seem to indicate that character education and the virtues necessary for the digital context are

not so very different from the generic proposals suited for a context of face-to-face personal relationships. In any event, our line of argument is that we need to adapt to the new environment while maintaining the essence and basic fundamentals in use until now; it is clearly not a question of a new type of character education for the digital environment, nor of new virtues to substitute the old.

A preliminary consideration which can be made is the obvious fact that, although we make wide use of technology, we do not live in a virtual world. A large and significant number of our activities are carried out in analogical contexts and are based on face-to-face personal relationships into which technology does not intrude. To be more precise, we could in fact identify three environments: the virtual, the personal and the hybrid, the third being understood as a conjunction of elements of the other two. It would therefore be unwise to claim that a new digital education of character is needed to take the place of the former, since, by doing so, we would be relegating to a secondary level an important part of our existence. Is politics still possible without the use of virtual environments? Is love still possible today without the use of technological devices? Does friendship outside the social media still make sense? Can we teach and educate without the use of machines or screens, for example by taking a walk through the countryside or the city, by visiting patients in a hospital or by going to a museum? If our answer to these questions is affirmative — without even entering into the added value or the enabling role that technology could play in

them — then we are speaking of spaces in which the centre of our action is not digital. Indeed, one of the lessons we can learn from the health crisis is that basic education, one of the most important pillars of our societies and at the same time one of the key stages of a person's life, cannot be completely virtual, not so much because of the alarming digital gap which hinders access to technological media, nor the difficulties which it implies in respect of conciliating home and work life, but rather because of the importance of face-to-face personal relationships in human growth and development. As yet, human life in a virtual environment is not possible.

At the same time, the human being's endless capacity to create new technology is persistently limited by the constraints imposed by the human condition itself. Although some space or time barriers have been overcome, others are stubbornly insurmountable. In spite of easy and multiple access to information, we are unable to read two documents simultaneously: we still have to concentrate all our attention on a single document. Multitasking divides a person's attention but does not multiply it, and has a dilutory effect on the depth of intellectual comprehension. Sophisticated, high definition cameras are as yet unable to give us ubiquity or to overcome the mind-body or cognitive-corporal dissociation which we experience in virtual spaces; our attention remains focused on a single space. While an array of devices allows us to save valuable time, they can do nothing to alter the distressing finitude of human life or to halt the inevitable passage of time, something which is in fact comfort-

ing in view of the problems suffered by the *struldbrugs*. These characters, taken from Jonathan Swift's classic novel (2000) *Gulliver's Travels*, inhabit the land of Luggnagg and have to cope with immortality, something which our species considers advantageous and sought after, but which paradoxically is the source of all sorts of individual and social problems. Among them is one of great relevance to character education: their existence is apparently unending, lacks any sense of the transcendental and is the source numerous obstacles regarding social organization and intergenerational change.

In any event, the increase of life expectancy resulting from present-day technology is in no way comparable to the idea of immortality. The finitude of life remains in spite of the extension of the years and does nothing to modify the fact that, as Zubiri states (1986, p.658), "to exist is to exist constitutively in the face of death". In conversation with Heidegger, Zubiri partially shares the other's idea that a person who lives without a prior experience of death does live an authentic existence (*eigentliches Dasein*). However, the idea of immortality suggests a new category which is similar to the mathematical conception of infinite and is more akin to a representation, since proof of its existence is impossible; death "belongs to the formal structure of the living human: it is that act which positively projects man from the provisional to the definitive" (Op.cit., p. 666). Even while religious faith contains the promise and hope of the immortality of the soul, life still has an obvious limit in death. St. Augustine shows this symbol-

ically when he describes a first death as that which precedes the final judgement, and a second and permanent death which is reserved to those do not pass that judgement. The first is not simply a fee of passage; it is the gateway to another form of existence and a major condition for the life thereafter (2000, XIII, 23).

The second question we should ask is whether it makes sense to speak of new virtues in the context of a realistic system of ethics, such as the ethics of virtue on which present-day neo-Aristotelian education of character is built. To speak of *new ethics* should surely cause alarm bells to ring among those who believe that the basis of ethics is objective and realistic; in other words, that it is not founded solely on human conventions, which, by nature, are changeable, but on the idea that the source of morality lies outside the subjective beliefs of the individual and of society. In the case of the ethics of virtue, the criteria to decide what is good and what is evil are constitutively rooted in the anthropology of the human being himself and his perfective potential, and therefore it is pertinent to ask if it is possible to speak of new virtues or features of character arising from the *new technological context*. By contrast, it seems probable that this claim would fit more easily into a system of constructivist ethics which would be more receptive towards emerging social demands and more amenable to the creation of new ethical norms. By their very nature, they are changeable and depend on historical circumstances and on the inter-subjective rationality of a group

or a society; they are not subject to any permanent feature of the human being. In this sense, what John Dewey writes is highly significant. Starting from a pragmatic standpoint, he considers society, not the individual and his human condition, as the reference point in deciding on the content of school curricula. Thus, in *The School and Society* he stated that:

> Whenever we have in mind the discussion of a new movement in education, it is especially necessary to take the broader, or social view. Otherwise, changes in the school institution and tradition will be looked at as the arbitrary inventions of particular teachers; at the worst transitory fads, and at the best merely improvements in certain details. (Dewey 1899, p. 20)

At the same time, a system of ethics constructed in opposition to cognitive or realistic ethics seems to be more suited to a technological context, one of whose principal characteristics appears to be a logic attuned to the apparently endless ability of the human being to create and to produce a variety of artefacts, devices, programmes, publications, opinions, tendencies etc.; therefore, new norms and values can be new elements influenced by the creative freedom of users. This creative prominence of the individual, which surpasses the role of being a mere spectator or consumer to become an active protagonist, has given birth to what has come to be known as a *culture maker* (Hatch, 2013) and is linked not only with material aspects in the construction of devices but also with the civic participation of citizens in the public arena and in support of democracy (Gozálvez et al.,

2022). However, it is not easy to imagine how new virtues could be integrated into a realist ethical system such as virtue ethics, which does not accommodate exclusively subjective criteria in order to determine the meaning of a righteous life (Kristjánsson, 2017); such a system must find an equilibrium between what is subjectively satisfactory and what is objectively praiseworthy (Curren, 2015). The foundation of ethical behaviour is given human reality itself and the perfective nature of the virtues potentially present, neither of which we completely determine ourselves. For this reason, it is meaningless to talk about new virtues because of a change of context.

It could be argued that present day suggestions regarding character education, although inspired by Aristotle, are not completely aligned with the philosopher's ideas since they have required a certain practical adaptation in view of new advances in knowledge and experience, which is why they are referred to as neo-Aristotelian (Kristjánsson, 2015). However, this renovation and updating of Aristotelian ethics has in no way repudiated their essential pillars; the cornerstones of his proposals regarding character education maintain their adherence to objective reality and their rejection of subjectivist approaches. A given reality can be known, at least partially and, by means of speculative research and the examination of experience, it is possible to reveal common features which can be promoted through education for the benefit and improvement of individuals and the societies they live in,

This approach helps us to counter the arguments outlined in the preceding section. It is true that the new habits such as those arising from virtual environments and the use of technological devices in human space and time are an important challenge for character education and virtues. But they are a challenge which can be met by the Aristotelian model of virtues. We must necessarily make a specific reference to prudence, a virtue objective which highlights and at the same time limits the role of context in deciding what is good, since "the doing of good presupposes the accordance of our action with the real situation" (Pieper, 2020, p. 47). The virtue of prudence presupposes the ability to analyse, deliberate and judge according to changing circumstances. In other words, the insufficiency of the individual virtues themselves to determine the mid-point between two vices on the one hand, and the inability of the context on its own to tell us what would be the right course at a given moment of time and space on the other, make it necessary to call on a practical wisdom which can regulate decision making in specific contexts, the here and now, which will never necessarily be the same in any two given situations. For that reason, the virtuous answer varies: for example, when the person who has to decide to enter a building in flames is a trained fireman or a person suffering from asthma: while for the first it is an act of bravery, for the second it would be a reckless behaviour which would place his own life in danger and have scant possibilities of rescuing anyone from the burning building. When the fireman is confronted with an emergency situation, he evaluates the circumstances before acting. The fact that he is familiar with certain factors may speed up his decision, but unusual situations call for extra deliberation, greater risk analysis, the establishment of limits and the adoption of measures which in different circumstances might not be necessary.

Thus, we can say that the new digital context requires not only a special use of practical wisdom but also deliberation and a close examination of an unfamiliar reality; this will allow us to decide how to act in the face of unknown circumstances which we have never had to confront before. *Cyber-wisdom* or *cyber-phronesis* refer precisely to the ability to do the right thing at the right time, but in the context of the online world (Harrison, 2016, 2021). At the heart of the matter is the ability to think critically and autonomously, but in a context which has certain characteristics of its own such as anonymity, ease of access, lack of physical presence — with what that means in respect of the level of empathy; the user also has the feeling that regulation in the web is much looser than in the physical world. However, the very definition of cyber-wisdom offered by Harrison pre-empts the idea that it is not a question of a new virtue, but rather an adaptation of classic wisdom. In his own words: "I define cyber-wisdom as doing the right thing for the right reasons when online. This is a quality that children can apply in any given situation" (2021, p. xii). From the above, two relevant points arise. The first is that if we delete from the quote the words "when online", we could be perfectly well talking about classic wisdom, inasmuch as we

decide what to do for the right reasons in *different* situations; this gives the digital an adjectivized character, not substantive but complementary, additional to the nuclear and essential, because it refers to the circumstances without changing the content of the virtue. Let's call to mind Aristotle's definition when he described it as the ability to determine with certain precision "what is just, noble and good for man" (1143b, 20-25), whereas for Pieper "the meaning of prudence is to find the right means to those ends and to determine the course of action, in conformity with the here and now of these fundamental dispositions" (2020, p. 84), Here we have the second relevant question which refers to a constituent part of the concept of prudence, the ability to be versatile and adapt ourselves to different contexts, and, after considering the setting and characteristics of the new environment — face-to-face, online, hybrid, safe, dangerous, sombre, luminous, rural or urban — express a judgement in accordance with the righteous.

If we go back and look carefully at the definition of critical thinking described in the previous section, we will see that it is in no way inadequate for the digital context and that the principles it establishes are possible conditions and valid and applicable references to articulate a critical and righteous position in respect of virtual environments. Doubtless the circumstances described will be more demanding — which is always the case whenever there is a change — and will call for greater deliberation of the information received and in some cases — for

example, in respect of knowledge and use of new information sources — for new competencies. We are referring, rather than to different competencies, to their application, which is to be accompanied by a close examination of the technological context which we have been referring to (and which will include problems which are peculiar to this world, such as cyber-bullying, disinformation, cyber-harassment and sexting, among others). Many of the techniques that are used in education of critical thinking can be applied mutatis mutandis to the digital context. For example, in the same way that moral dilemmas of different types are used in the classroom, some such dilemmas could be included which would demand reflection on the long term consequences of some of our actions on internet. Or in the same way that we compile manuals which guide our behaviour, we could also establish norms for our conduct on internet (*netiquette)*

The root of the question here is that the fundamental objective continues to be the love of wisdom, as Gilson points out when, to express his idea of the erudite, he defines intellectual humility as "scrupulous respect for the truth" (Gilson, 2015; Vid. Ibáñez- Martín, 2021). By its very nature, virtue as a practical and operative concept is linked to determined circumstances and the factors of time and place should be taken into account when measuring its value. As the English usually say: *the proof of the pudding is in the eating!* Its full meaning is acquired in practice, when it is exercised and lived, not simply its theory and description,

which reduces it to a merely theoretical construct, an imaginary ideal lacking the context which gives it shape. Considered in these terms, it becomes flexible and pliable, as we saw in the case of the fireman and the asthma patient. Thus what changes in the digital context is not the virtue but the context itself, as is demonstrated by the fact that the definitions of critical thinking or practical wisdom formulated prior to the watershed moment of the technological revolution are still valid for a virtual environment.

It is, however, appropriate to point out that the virtual environment has contributed to mark up the value of certain virtues against others, or, to put it another way, it has created the conditions in which certain abilities are tested more than others. As the search for reliable information in internet demands greater critical scrutiny, we should also bear in mind that our wider possibilities of action and influence over others gives greater relevance to the virtue of responsibility, as Jonas (1985) showed in the context of the nuclear arms race — a context which is in certain ways parallel to our actions in internet and the social networks. It is also true that the virtual context offers ample space for creativity, along with new media, multimedia production channels and transmedia, which can be especially useful in the training of young people (Scolari, 2019).

At the same time, reflection on the subject of virtues in the technological context reveals links between certain features of character which need to be reinforced. In-deed, the strengthening of critical thought would seem to call for a parallel strengthening of the virtue of fortitude, which will enable users to withstand the pressure exerted by the social networks and to resist and to persist in the face of well- or ill-founded criticism. The protection of privacy is another of the most relevant and disputed challenges that the social networks pose to character education; the exposure which the network invites and the numerous examples of youthful exposure we are witnessing today seems to question the value of the private and the personal, the lines which separate different social environments and even the sense of corporeality and its inseparable connotations in the human mind.

4. Conclusions

The need to respond to a new and confusing environment, which amazes us and unsettles our given mental structures with its continued novelty and increased possibilities of action, the desire to accept the promise of a more comfortable life and a more efficient, more efficacious and more modern education in spite of the fear of emerging threats or of not rising to the challenges of the times and of wasting advantageous new resources or not acting responsibly in the face of an extraordinary technological force — all these factors cannot leave us, as it were, dazed and numb, and driven to irreflectively embrace the dazzling wonder of a new reality as if no other alternative were possible. We feel moved to create new languages which place us in an unprecedented milieu in

which we try to come to grips with phenomena with which classical structures and categories of thought seems to be insufficient and which elude our traditional logic. However, precisely at times of uncertainty and confusion, when everything appears to be changing like the river of Heraclitus, it is necessary to put to the test the pillars which support our conception of the world and not forsake them at the drop of a hat; we must maintain the hope that what remains will to some extent respond to the new challenges. Let us remember the words of Peter Kreeft in reference to practical wisdom:

> Moral rules and ideals are not designed for the good times but for the bad times (…) They are like the laws of the State: they are most needed not when people are good but when they are bad, to protect people against evil (Kreeft 1993, p. 20).

The different facets of human life which have been challenged by technology are in no way trivial and there is little doubt that both philosophers and theoreticians of education should be on the alert in respect of the virtues necessary to achieve the fullness of human life in a new and predominantly hybrid context. In spite of this, a close analysis would seem to indicate that character education founded on neo-Aristotelian principles has the necessary resources to deal with the ethical and teaching challenges posed by the virtual environments. The ethics of virtue are founded on the perfective potential of the human person, and while these have not been modified by the new context, they need to be adapted to take into account certain particular circumstances; it will also be necessary to reappraise virtues which have acquired a new importance and even to associate them with others in order to reinforce the integral dimension of character in all its complexity.

Note

[1] Destiny is against me, in health and in virtue, thrusting and hobbling, always enslaving. At this hour, without delay, may the vibrant strings be played; since destiny defeats the strongest, who weeps with me for such villainy. Fortune is now against me in health and virtue; but with loves and failings I still forge ahead. At this unaccustomed hour, feel the pulse of my heart, which thankfully beats yet stronger and mourn you all with me.

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