

An Epistemic Approach to Human Flourishing: What Should We Talk About When We Talk About the Epistemology of Education?

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In “Invitation to Virtue Epistemologists: Epistemic Goal of Education Revisited,” Ka Ya Lee calls for an open conversation between virtue epistemologists and philosophers of education. There is a growing body of literature on “intellectual virtues” and education by virtue epistemologists. However, Lee invites them to stop and think more about “education” – Why should we cultivate intellectual virtues in education? What are the aim(s) of education? She contends that these fundamental questions inform a “well-grounded” epistemology of education.

The key concept in Lee’s discussion is “cognitive flourishing.” First, responding to the above questions, Lee identifies “human flourishing” as the appropriate aim of education. According to her, it’s the appropriate aim because it captures the “intrinsic” value of learning; and also, because it’s “comprehensive” or broad enough to accommodate other values of learning, i.e., “civic and ethical” value and “practical and employable” value. Lee then focuses on a “subset” of human flourishing, cognitive flourishing, as the “epistemic goal of education.” In her view, this goal should guide a virtue-based epistemology of education.

I am pleased to respond to Lee’s call for a more fruitful conversation on epistemology and education, as I share her interest in the role of epistemology in education. In this response, as a preliminary to discussing cognitive flourishing, I want to focus on the crucial step of the argument, that is, the one from human flourishing to cognitive flourishing. As said above, cognitive flourishing is defined as a part of the whole, i.e., human flourishing, which encompasses the three educational values: “intrinsic,” “civic and ethical,” and “practical and

employable” values. However, in light of this all-encompassing view, I wonder what is exactly meant by “cognitive flourishing” – how is it related to human flourishing? What does it mean to say that “cognitive flourishing is a subset of human flourishing”?

The question here is whether and how we can isolate a subset of human flourishing. To begin with, while human flourishing explains the intrinsic value of learning, it should be noted that flourishing and learning are not synonymous. Flourishing, or *eudaimonia* (well-being), is a richer concept: it includes not only many forms of learning but also many other dimensions of experience — such as joy, love, and wonder. The “subjective” elements are highlighted notably in Nel Noddings and are combined with “objective” criteria (e.g., health, physical and intellectual pursuits, social relations) in recent literature on flourishing.¹ As Kristján Kristjánsson points out, it is this combination or harmony which Aristotle champions in his account of *eudaimonia*: a certain kind of pleasure indicates a flourishing life.²

Furthermore, we should think about human flourishing as a “whole.” Lee draws upon human flourishing in order to justify the educational enterprise. And she argues, this makes a subset of human flourishing, i.e., cognitive flourishing, the “epistemic” aim of education. However, as long as the overarching aim of education is human flourishing, cognitive flourishing must be considered in relation to human flourishing. For example, suppose that a student pursues her cognitive achievement, e.g., writing a mathematical proof, by using cognitive-enhancing drugs and threatening her health. Even if she has the desire to do so, we wouldn’t say that she enjoys “cognitive flourishing.” On the other hand, we can imagine another student who has a certain learning disability in mathematics, but enjoys having the support of his friends and learning with them — it seems he is achieving “cognitive and human flourishing.” In short, we can’t define cognitive flourishing without reference to human flourishing; particularly when we talk about the aim(s) of education, we can’t discuss, for example, *cognitive* flourishing, *moral* flourishing, *aesthetic* flourishing etc., independently from the holistic flourishing. In fact, the priority on the whole, or the “whole child,” is emphasized in literature on flourishing as an/the aim of education.³

One might say that cognitive flourishing is a special part of human flourishing. Considering Aristotle's discussion on contemplation at the end of *Nicomachean Ethics*, one might argue that human flourishing *is* cognitive flourishing, or "intellectual flourishing," which is promoted and sustained by "intellectual virtues." [Here, I use the word "intellectual" instead of "cognitive." This is because, in Aristotle's account, contemplation is not a solitary activity, but a communal or social one; however, the word "cognitive" has the implicit focus on individuals, which is not apt to describe a community of flourishing and collective flourishing.] However, this intellectualist strategy would not work, given Lee's comprehensive account of human flourishing, which encompasses the three values ("intrinsic," "civic and ethical," and "practical and employable" values). It is not her point that the aim of education is the epistemic one.

How then can we discuss cognitive flourishing in relation to human flourishing? First, if flourishing is a holistic concept and we can't isolate a *type* of flourishing — particularly in the context of education, it may be better to use a different term than "cognitive flourishing." For example, it might be better framed as a cognitive approach to human flourishing, or cognitive efficacy. Importantly, the implication here is that we can't discuss a "purely epistemic" aim of education; in other words, we can't discuss education from a "purely epistemic" point of view. Some might say we can — however, we should be careful, save for heuristic purposes, not to distort our vision of holistic human flourishing. And if so, our central questions would be: *What cognitive/intellectual elements are conducive to human flourishing? How does the cognitive/intellectual dimension facilitate human flourishing?* To explore these questions, we can also draw upon the literature on flourishing, as well as the epistemology of education tradition in the philosophy of education.⁴

Lastly, more attention should be paid to the strength of a virtue-based epistemology of education. It is possible to pursue an epistemology of education centered on flourishing without using the notion of intellectual virtues. It is possible, for example, to feature rationality or practical wisdom (*phronesis*, which is the key "intellectual virtue" in Aristotle's account, but is rarely discussed in contemporary virtue epistemology).⁵ So, the question here is in what context and

why the virtue-based approach is helpful and beneficial. Perhaps the plurality of intellectual virtues allows us to see the plural models of intellectually virtuous characters. A list of intellectual virtues, e.g., intellectual humility, courage, open-mindedness, may help teachers see each student's intellectual character which is not necessarily reflected in the standard academic assessment.

1 Nel Noddings, *Happiness and Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). See, for example, Harry Brighouse, *On Education* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Doret De Ruyter, "Ideals, Education, and Happy Flourishing," *Educational Theory* 57, no.1 (2007): 23-35.

2 Kristján Kristjánsson, *Aristotelian Character Education* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Kristján Kristjánsson "Recent Work on Flourishing as the Aim of Education: A Critical Review," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 65, no. 1 (2017): 87-107.

3 See, for example, Lynne S. Wolbert, Doret De Ruyter, and Anders Schinkel, "Formal Criteria for the Concept of Human Flourishing: The First Step in Defending Flourishing as an Ideal Aim of Education," *Ethics and Education* 10, no.1 (2015): 118-129.

4 According to Higgins, "Education is the ongoing conversation taking place in the space opened by the question of what best facilitates human flourishing; it consists of the explicit and implicit answers, described and enacted, by those theorists, practitioners, and theorist/practitioners who feel called to join the conversation." Chris Higgins, *The Good Life of Teaching: An Ethics of Professional Practice* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 258 (emphasis in original). This hermeneutical conception of education centered on "human" "flourishing" would be a valuable addition to the Aristotelian, neo-Aristotelian, and semi-Aristotelian accounts covered in Kristjánsson's "Recent Work on Flourishing as the Aim of Education: A Critical Review."

5 See, for example, Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking, and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1988).