Character education and virtues: A personalist pedagogical perspective

Educación del carácter y virtudes: una perspectiva pedagógica personalista

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Abstract

The subject of character education has aroused increasing interest over the past decades, during which several specialised research centres have taken shape. As part of the awakening of interest in practical philosophy, extensive research on the ethics of virtues has been developed. There are some research centres, especially in the UK, which have linked character education and the development of virtues. A pedagogical framework that would be interesting to explore more deeply can be identified within the personalist approach, above all through the contribution of Thomas Aquinas. This paper develops the idea that Aquinas's moral doctrine on virtues can be the ideal theoretical foundation for the education of character in the personalist sense.

Keywords: character education, virtues, Thomas Aquinas, pedagogical personalism

Resumen

La educación del carácter ha despertado un interés creciente en las últimas décadas, durante las cuales se han conformado varios centros de investigación especializados. Como parte del despertar del interés por la filosofía práctica, se han desarrollado extensas investigaciones sobre la ética de las virtudes. Hay algunos centros de investigación, especialmente en el Reino Unido, que han vinculado la educación del carácter y el desarrollo de las virtudes. Un marco pedagógico que sería interesante explorar más profundamente puede identificarse dentro del enfoque personalista, sobre todo a través de la contribución de Tomás de Aquino. Este artículo desarrolla la idea de que la doctrina moral de Tomás de Aquino sobre las virtudes puede ser el fundamento teórico ideal para la educación del carácter en el sentido personalista.

Palabras clave*: educación del carácter, virtudes, Tomás de Aquino, personalismo pedagógico*

Introduction

For those involved in education, it is quite normal to be solicited by a multiplicity of concrete issues, sometimes dramatic, that are configured as real educational emergencies. We can mention, for example, alcohol and drug addiction, bullying and cyberbullying, school dropout, anxiety and depression, intolerance, violence, poor participation in social and civil life and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the growth of children and adolescents.

Against this background, there is a risk of focusing on individual problems, leading to fragmented educational interventions that do not leave a deep mark on the growth of children and young people. Even the theoretical frameworks on which such educational interventions are based risk being sectoral and partial. Educational campaigns aiming at a few clear and limited objectives are not enough to change socially undesirable attitudes that can have deep roots.

For this reason, it is important to recover educational perspectives that take into consideration the human person as a whole or that at least offer a broader and more comprehensive vision of educational work. In the psychological field, for example, there is talk of *emotional intelligence* and *social–emotional learning* (Basu & Mermillod, 2011; Weissberg et al., 2015; Jones & Carter, 2020), which involve carrying out appropriate behaviours towards oneself and others based on specific skills, such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relation skills and responsible decision making. In the pedagogical field, it is necessary to find even wider perspectives, which include the personal and responsible involvement of the growing person. The perspective of *personalised education*, proposed by García Hoz (1988), has the goal of helping make students' personal freedom effective, thereby increasing each student's ability to lead their own life in such a way that it becomes a personal project (Pérez Guerrero & Ahedo Ruiz, 2020). Personalised education is characterised by its explicit conception of the human being as a person with a spiritual, free and intelligent nature who assumes their responsibilities in society (Porcarelli 2017). It differs from the paradigm of *holistic education* (Forbes, 2003; Mahmoudi et al., 2012; John, 2017; Miller, 2019), which is configured as an eclectic perspective that can accommodate different points of view but which easily finds a unifying key in New Age thinkers or in Edgar Morin's theory of complexity.

In this general context of increasing interest in the personal formation of children and adolescents, it is possible to deepen two perspectives directly linked to the moral dimension of education: *character education* and *virtue education*. These two approaches, which have interesting links between them, have regained strength since the final years of the twentieth century. This followed a period in which the themes of moral education were addressed through fundamentally relativistic approaches (Bernal et al., 2015), such as through the analysis of moral cases or by simply promoting tolerance towards any ethical perspective. The proposed path also intercepts with the recovery of practical philosophy, which began with the reflections proposed by Gadamer in the 1960s and found fertile ground in Anglo-Saxon culture (Berti, 2005; Cremaschi, 2005; Da Re, 2022). It is certainly worth mentioning the work of Alasdair MacIntyre (1988, 1999, 2007), who since the 1980s has proposed a renewed interest in practical philosophy, taking up

the perspectives of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas and, in particular, deepening the theme of virtues (Darr, 2020).

This paper aims to outline a theoretical framework that connects some of the issues that emerge within *character education* with the rediscovery of virtues. It does this in the context of a personalist pedagogical perspective in which the thought of Aquinas plays an important role.

Illuminating Character Education

The expression *character education* (CE) is used to indicate a specific psychopedagogical approach that has a long tradition, with its origins dating back to the early Greek philosophers. For example, Socrates wanted his students to be at the same time both smart and good. Plato and Aristotle deepened this reflection by identifying the main virtues that a smart and good man should possess. Theophrastus, a disciple of Aristotle, wrote a work explicitly dedicated to the different types of character. More recently, CE is linked to the reflections of Gordon W. Allport. He distinguishes between character and personality (Banicki, 2017), stating that the idea of character includes an ethical dimension. In the field of psychology, the contribution of Lawrence Kohlberg (1981) is important, who takes up the reflections of Piaget and applies them to the moral development of the individual (Snarey & Samuelson 2008), elaborating the model of *just community schools*.

The most authoritative author in terms of pedagogical reflection on CE in the North American world is Thomas Lickona (1991), who defines the concept of character in the following terms:

Character consists of operative values, values in action. We progress in our character as a value becomes a virtue, a reliable inner disposition to respond to situations in a morally good way. Character so conceived has three interrelated parts: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral behavior. Good character consists of knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good. (p. 51)

CE is generally presented as a solution to a long list of social issues that affect young people who are in a state of moral decline. It consists of educating a good character from the ethical point of view, as it is impossible to educate without a specific framework of *paideia*. It is typical of the pedagogical approach to connect the descriptive and methodological aspects of education with those of a value type: every educator works so that the person being educated can become better, hopefully becoming a good person. In the American cultural context, there is a traditional distinction between moral education (ME) and CE (Arthur, 2014), as the expression ME originally indicated a religious (generally Christian) moral education, while the expression CE was used to indicate a more secular approach.

Today, this distinctive element does not seem particularly relevant, as while it is true that the CE movement, both in the USA and in the UK, does not explicitly refer to a religious faith, it is not difficult to find among its principles many elements of a vision of the person inspired by Christianity (Felini, 2021). In identifying the specificity of the CE pedagogical approach, the explicit reference to the virtues now seems more significant, which will be discussed in more detail later. The beginnings of the contemporary CE movement can be traced back

to 1992, when the Josephson Institute of Ethics[1] brought together in Aspen, Colorado, a group of 30 scholars, educational leaders, politicians and experts on North American ethics (including Lickona himself). The result was the Aspen Declaration, which provided the eight guiding principles for CE, the third of which can be considered the heart of the whole movement's programme: "People do not automatically develop good moral character; therefore, conscientious efforts must be made to help young people develop the values and abilities necessary for moral decision-making and conduct" (Josephson Institute of Ethics, 1992).

In the following year, two organisations were formed that promote the most common CE programmes in the USA: the Character Counts Coalition (CCC) and the Character Education Partnership (CEP). The first is an emanation of the Josephson Institute of Ethics and has developed the programme called Character Counts! which is based on *six pillars of character*: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and good citizenship. To start a character education programme, you are encouraged to buy a Character Counts! kit that includes lesson plans, stickers, activity plans and various other classroom items. A typical feature of this CE programme is its emphasis on methodological aspects and their effects in terms of changing student behaviour.

The CEP's approach is based on 11 principles (Lickona et al. 2007) that schools and other groups can use to plan CE initiatives and evaluate the available CE programmes: (1) It promotes core ethical values and supportive performance values as the foundation of good character; (2) it defines character comprehensively to include thinking, feeling and behaviour; (3) it uses a comprehensive, intentional and proactive approach to character development; (4) it creates a caring school community; (5) it provides students with opportunities for moral action; (6) it includes a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners, develops their character and helps them succeed; (7) it strives to foster students' self-motivation; (8) it engages the school staff as a learning and moral community that shares responsibility for CE and attempts to adhere to the same core values that guide the education of students; (9) it fosters shared moral leadership and long-range support of the CE initiative; (10) it engages families and community members as partners in the character-building effort; and (11) it assesses the character of the school, the school staff's functioning as character educators and the extent to which students manifest good character. These principles are criteria for planning a CE programme and recognising the achievements of schools (Berkowitz et al., 2020).

Particularly interesting is the CE model developed by the University of Birmingham's Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues, founded in 2012 by James Arthur. This approach explicitly links CE with the Aristotelian and Christian conceptions of the virtues and will be discussed in more detail later. Also notable is the Narnian Virtues project, active at the University of Leeds,[2] which aims to educate character and virtues through engagement with the *Narnia* novels of C. S. Lewis.

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1   This is a non-profit organisation based in Los Angeles, California, founded by Michael Josephson in 1987. For more information, see the website: https://charactercounts.org/. Accessed 8 July 2023.

2   For more information, see the website: https://narnianvirtues. leeds.ac.uk/. Accessed 8 July 2023.

The centres involved in CE are very active in creating innovative teaching practices (Felini 2021), which encompass not only training activities but also care for interpersonal relationships, the school environment, democratic participation in school life, the promotion of voluntary activities and *service-learning* projects. Many schools participating in CE programmes have conducted parental and family involvement initiatives. This attention to the relational atmosphere is a focal point for all character educators, with a special emphasis on the idea of a school *ethos*. *Ethos* is an elusive concept, and it is difficult to focus on its specific meaning for the purposes of analysis and discussion (Arthur 2014).

The revival of practical wisdom and virtues in the 20th century

Virtue ethics is one of the oldest ethical theories in the western and non-western traditions of thought, deriving from ancient Greek philosophy (Socrates, Plato and Aristotle) and Chinese philosophy (Confucius). Moreover, as a central doctrine of Christianity (Thomas Aquinas), virtue ethics remained a dominant ethical theory in western moral philosophy until the Enlightenment. However, it "was overshadowed by the emergence of the rule-based approaches to ethics during the nineteenth century (Kantianism or Deontology), which emphasized rules or duties and utilitarianism, which looks at consequences of acts" (Papouli, 2018, p. 923). The revival of practical philosophy (Berti, 2005) began with some reflections by Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (2004), originally published in1960, and with Elizabeth Anscombe's (1958) paper on "Modern Moral Philosophy." Anglo-American philosophy has played a considerable

role in the diffusion of the virtue ethics perspective as an alternative to deontological and utilitarian approaches. Virtue ethics theory became popular in the 1980s thanks to the philosophers Philippa Foot (*Virtues and Vices*, 1978) and Alasdair MacIntyre (*After Virtue,* 1981). Rules and duties always remain important points of reference, but the virtue ethics approach also considers the attitudes internalised by the subject, which is very important, especially from the pedagogical point of view.

First published in 1981, MacIntyre's work suggested developing an approach that could overcome the impasse in contemporary ethical debates through research based on Aristotle's conception. The research of MacIntyre continued over the next three decades, so much so that in the third edition of *After Virtue* (2007), he consciously reread the thought of Aristotle in the light of that of Aquinas (2007):

When I wrote *After Virtue*, I was already an Aristotelian, but not yet a Thomist, something made plain in my account of Aquinas at the end of chapter 13. I became a Thomist after writing *After Virtue* in part because I became convinced that Aquinas was in some respects a better Aristotelian than Aristotle, that not only was he an excellent interpreter of Aristotle's texts, but that he had been able to extend and deepen both Aristotle's metaphysical and his moral enquiries. (p. X)

The reflection of MacIntyre is not presented as *Thomist* in the strict sense but rather as an itinerary that follows a *bottom-up* path, starting from a first definition of virtue that is connected to the values internal to practices. Thus, "a virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively

prevents us from achieving any such goods" (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 191). The key idea that allows us to overcome the limits of this first definition (which connects the concept of virtue to socially codified practices) is of an Aristotelian–Thomist derivation: "without an overriding conception of the telos of a whole human life, conceived as a unity, our conception of certain individual virtues has to remain partial and incomplete" (p. 202). The theoretical proposal of Aquinas is more radical, as he considers the cardinal virtues as an integral part of a path of life oriented towards the ultimate goal of man, that is, beatitude. In any case, the reference to the telos of a whole human life allows MacIntyre to make explicit the ethical value of the virtues:

> The virtues therefore are to be understood as those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices, but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good, by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which we encounter and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good.... We have then arrived at a provisional conclusion about the good life for man: the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is. (2007, p. 219)

Today, there is a wide range of approaches that fall under the heading of virtue ethics. Each of them places emphasis on certain different characteristics, but there may also be common elements, as has been analysed by several scholars (Oakley, 1996; Carr et al., 2016). The inevitable reference point for all is the thought of Aristotle, as "Aristotle was the first to look at virtues as part of human nature and take a scientific approach to explore and better understand their role in the people's personal and social well-being" (Papouli, 2018, p. 4).

The theoretical hypothesis that is argued here is that in the context of the recovery of traditional philosophical doctrines on virtues, the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas can find a privileged space in a personalist pedagogical perspective.

The rediscovery of Thomas Aquinas in pedagogical personalism

The personalist movement took shape in the 1930s around certain French intellectuals as a cultural response to the great human, political and social crises that characterised that era. Personalism is a philosophical, political, cultural, and pedagogical worldview that represents more than one school; thus, it is correct to speak of many personalisms. In addition to distancing itself from all materialistic systems of thought and the opposing political views of individualism and collectivism, personalism offers the person (with its inalienable dignity, communional telos, and mystery) as the normative standard by which interpersonal relationships, intrapersonal activities and political structures can be improved and judged. It emphasises the uniqueness and inviolability of the human person, as well as the person's essentially relational and social dimension. Among the authors who have been sources of inspiration for personalism is certainly Thomas Aquinas, who explicitly inspired Maritain's thought. In those same years, the thought of Aquinas was also recovered in the pedagogical field, thanks to its explicit quotation in the encyclical *Divini illius magistri* of Pope Pius XI (Porcarelli, 2018).

Particularly interesting are several Italian pedagogists, including Mario Casotti (1931), the author of a text on the pedagogy of Aquinas that inspired his disciples Gesualdo Nosengo and Aldo Agazzi. Among the Italian pedagogists who elaborated their reflections based on the thought of Aquinas, we should remember Gino Corallo, whose pedagogical vision is based on Aquinas's text, to which he attributes a *foundational* role. This is the definition of education quoted by Pius XI from the *Supplement*[3] to the Third Part of the *Summa Theologiae* (q. 41): "Non enim intendit natura solum generationem prolis, sed traductionem et promotionem usque ad perfectum statum hominis inquantum homo est, qui est status virtutis." The formal unity of the notion of education results from the substantial unity of the human person and is a necessary condition for the unity of pedagogy as science. It is thus important to emphasise that education is a well-defined kind of human beings' form of formation. Education is precisely the formation of the usual capacity to act fairly with freedom, which is the intentional process that tends to form ordered habits of moral life in the pupil, ensuring as much as possible the pupil's possession of a wide and full freedom and the right and quick use of it (Corallo, 1951). This definition of education, based on the reflection of Aquinas, emphasises in a particular way the final clarification that we find in Aquinas's definition: "qui est status virtutis." This

close link between education and virtue is the focus of this paper.

Recently, personalism has developed in the direction of a mosaic of concepts, ranging from spiritualism, Christian existentialism and liberation theology to neo-Thomism. In Italy, there took place a discussion between Marcello Peretti and Giuseppe Catalfamo (1971), which contributed to the awareness that there are different ways of framing the *person* category in pedagogy. Spanish pedagogical personalism finds a very authoritative point of reference in Víctor García Hoz, founder of the Sociedad Española de Pedagogía in 1949. His pedagogical approach is called *personalised education* (*educación personalizada*), which is also the title of a volume released in its first edition in 1967 and constantly updated by the author until the eighth edition (García Hoz, 1988). The use of the term *personalised* is consciously detached from the meaning that it assumes in the Anglo-Saxon tradition (in which it is attributable to the idea of *customisation*, which is typical of the marketing world) to indicate an educational vision based on the human person as a unique, unrepeatable being of extraordinary dignity (Pérez Guerrero & Ahedo Ruiz, 2020). The human person, as an intelligent and free subject, is characterised by autonomy, that is, by the ability to direct oneself in individual choices and give orientation to one's whole life. The main purpose of personalised education is to foster this autonomy and accompany the person in developing their own life plan. The educational relationship is based on an authentic personal relationship grounded in love, which is to be realised in a convivial educational environment: an educational community. Gonzalo Jover Olmeda has devoted his attention to the aspect whereby education takes place between two

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3   Aquinas left the Third Part of *Summa Theologiae* unfinished, and it was Fr. Reginaldo from Piperno who completed the Summa by compiling a Supplement based on Aquinas's youthful writings. The text, strictly speaking, is spurious, but Pius XI and Corallo are quoting him as Tommasian, and we will also do so here.

The quotations from Thomas Aquinas are given in Latin. The text is derived from the Leonine critical edition found at the site www.corpusthomisticum.org. The classical method of quotation used by scholars of Aquinas is followed, along with the most common abbreviations.

apparently divergent loving forces (Jover, 1991): *eros* and *agape*. The desire and determination to reach educational goals represent the dimension of *eros*, while the educational relationship understood as a personal encounter based on love represents the dimension of *agape*.

In recent times, several Polish authors have proposed reflections on pedagogists who explicitly refer to the thought of Aquinas, sometimes passing through the reflections of Karol Wojtyła (John Paul II). Some Polish thinkers belong to the thought movement identified as Consistent Thomism, established by Mieczysław Gogacz (Lipski, 2021). The anthropology and ethics of Aquinas provide the philosophical basis for defining *what* a human being should become, and pedagogy identifies the operating principles that govern the actions that constitute the way of obtaining the improvements recommended by ethics. At the centre of a personalist pedagogy inspired by Aquinas is the Thomist vision of the person:

> *Person* is the name for that which is most perfect in the whole of nature, namely, independent existence (*subsistens*) in rational nature (*Summa Theologiae* I, q. 29, a. 3). He adds that this self-existence is of great dignity, which is why every individual of rational nature is referred to by the name "person" (*Summa Theologiae* I, q. 29, a. 3, ad 2). Mieczysław Gogacz thus defines a person as a rational being who also loves. Such an approach points to three aspects of the person: the establishment of a relation, rationality and the freedom resulting from this rationality for which the subject in the person is his or her will as the rational power to decide. (Lipski, 2021, pp. 181-182)

The main task of pedagogy in the view of *consistent Thomism* is to improve our ability to relate to truth and the good. Pedagogy thus has as its object the principle of choosing actions that improve the intellect and the will. Paweł Kaźmierczak's reflection is also interesting, reworking in a pedagogical sense the personalism of the Austrian philosopher Josef Seifert, starting from the awareness of the metaphysical foundation of the dignity of the person: "His axiological dimension of personal dignity can be expressed as transentelechy. The person is a transentelechy rather than entelechy, because her deepest being is transcendent and consists in conforming itself to the truth and the good for their own sake" (Kaźmierczak, 2017, pp.148-149). All the dimensions of the human person (intellect, will and emotions) are encompassed within education, each with characteristics that relate to the Thomist vision.

From the point of view of the operating style of those who educate, this approach emphasises that love plays a tremendous role in education and in the improvement of persons: "it gives to the person who is being loved a spiritual 'home' and 'shelteredness'; it extends to him a credit of trust which inspires a positive self-confidence and goodness" (Kaźmierczak 2017: 157). Explicit in its reference to Aquinas is the pedagogical realism of the Dominican friar Jacek Woroniecki: "personalistic education means that a human being, i.e. an individual, who is unaware of their objectives and tasks, should be transformed into an independent personalence who is able to use all their skills properly and consciously" (as cited in Chrost, 2020, p. 72). Woroniecki's pedagogical realism pays attention to the education of will, feelings and reason, and making our own decisions concerning individual development and its fulfilment is the end point of the educational path, as it is in a specific action that our human nature is revealed. In other words, the "transition from the

personality to the personalence shows the dynamics of personalistic education and the possibility of human development" (Chrost, 2020, p. 74).

Improving human action between habitus and virtues

The whole educational process involves the formation of skills. What makes a skill so important is that it accelerates and facilitates our behaviour and saves our living energy. A skill is a kind of condensed or capitalised experience that gives us the ability to make a resolution that, in certain circumstances, is the most adequate for the objective and conditions. The skills acquired in the process of education are to lead us to independence, self-education, and self-upbringing.

Thomas Aquinas uses the very wide category of *operating habit*, which embraces operational skills, attitudes of knowledge and ethical virtues. Operational habits that are ordered to the knowledge of truth can, in a broad sense, be called virtues, as they work for a good that is adequate to human nature. These habits of the mind are traditionally called the *intellectual virtues*. These are properties of mind through the correct exercise of which one may come to a proper account of reality. These properties are *intelligence* (*intellectus*), *science* (*scientia*) and *wisdom* (*sapientia*). Intelligence is the disposition of the mind for intuitive knowledge, starting with the first principles (e.g., the principle of non-contradiction) that do not need to be demonstrated. Science (in the Thomist conception) is the ability to know in an orderly and systematic way through rigorous demonstration. Wisdom (which Aquinas calls *sapientia* and the Greeks *sophia*) is a dianoetic virtue that drives the mind to consider the supreme principles and the ultimate causes of what it is possible to know.

On this basis, it is possible to formulate the definition that Aquinas proposes for the ethical virtues in the strict sense: "virtus humana, quae est habitus operativus, est bonus habitus et boni operativus" (*Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 55, art. 3, c). In this regard, Austin (2017, p. 59) notes that "in strict Aristotelian fashion, Aquinas has identified virtue's genus (habit), its more general difference (operative habit), and the specific difference that ultimately constitutes virtue as virtue (good operative habit)." This makes it possible to determine more clearly what operative powers humans can subject to properly virtuous habits. These are the operational powers that are not determined "ad unum" and that in some way are related to a conscious rationality, leading to actions that can be the subject of voluntary choice.

> Aquinas identifies three necessary conditions for a power of the soul counting as the subject of a virtue. First, since a virtue is an operative habit, its subject must be a power or capacity for operation (I.II 56.1c). Second, since a virtue is necessary only where a power can be disposed either well or badly to its operation, its subject must be a power that exists with some indifference or indeterminacy (49.4c). Finally, if the form of human virtue is the rational good, then only those powers that are potentially rational will qualify as subjects (61.2c). In sum, to be virtue's subject, a power must be operative, indeterminate, and potentially rational. (Austin, 2017, p. 132)

The anthropological presupposition of these statements of Aquinas is that humans are not condemned to be slaves of emotions, impulses and desires; instead, what Plato describes in *Phaedrus*

through the myth of the winged chariot can happen. The charioteer can either ride the most docile horse or hold the rebel horse in check. Our spiritual organism (the human soul) has an intrinsic unity, and it is possible to think of an *intelligent direction* that it can have in terms of itself. As for the relationship between the appetitive powers that are the seat of the emotions and the rational soul, Aquinas takes up the Aristotelian doctrine whereby reason rules the irascible and concupiscible through a politic authority rather than in a despotic way. "Aquinas says reason's rule over the sensitive appetite is politic, not despotic, because the lower power *resists* reason, inasmuch as we sense or imagine something pleasant that reason forbids, or unpleasant that reason commands" (Austin, 2017, p. 140).

The idea of a political domination over the emotional sphere and of a wise and intelligent direction in one's inner life have an evident and explicit pedagogical value that represents the heart of the reading that is proposed here. Reason should be *authoritative* rather than *authoritarian*, and this is also the style of educational action.

The four cardinal virtues as a paideia for the ethical life

Aquinas teaches that every virtue is attached to a power or faculty in the human person. The four main operational powers that can deal with moral life (i.e., actions that involve free and responsible choices) are the intellect, the will, the concupiscible appetite and the irascible appetite. The four cardinal virtues correspond to these four aspects of the person: prudence orders the intellect, justice orders the will, temperance orders the concupiscible appetite, and fortitude orders the irascible appetite (Pieper, 1966):

Harum autem quatuor virtutum prudentia quidem est in ratione, iustitia autem est in voluntate, fortitudo autem in irascibili, temperantia autem in concupiscibili; quae solae potentiae possunt esse principia actus humani, id est voluntarii. (Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de vritutibus*, q. 5, art. 1, resp.)

Prudence improves the practical intellect to transform our knowledge of reality to accomplish the good in the concrete circumstances in which actions take place. It is the most important of the cardinal virtues, as it connects a lucid knowledge of reality with the ability to identify possible morally correct choices in the changing concrete situations in which the moral life of every person takes place. Aristotle calls it *phronesis*, but we can also link it to what the Bible identifies through the name of *wisdom*. Aquinas considers the virtue of prudence as the *proximate rule* of moral actions:

General principles of morality need to be applied wisely to a situation; by themselves they are not the rule. Only the virtue of prudence, which takes these general principles from synderesis and applies them here and now, can serve as the proximate rule of morality.... Only the wise agent in situ can determine what is to be done here and now; there is no way of knowing this in advance, except in broad outlines. (Austin, 2017, p. 48)

Cultivating prudence, from the educational point of view, means making children accustomed to reflecting on their actions and wondering whether they have done or are about to do the right thing. The criteria for understanding what is good to do and what is good to avoid will initially be provided by adults (parents, educators and teachers) until children become able to independently search

for reasons why an action is to be done or to be avoided.

Justice orders the will to seek the good. This is done not only for ourselves but also to establish a balanced relationship with others, giving to each their due. Justice is articulated in a series of virtues linked to it, such as equity, gratitude, mutual respect and respect for authority. In other words, all correct and desirable attitudes in interpersonal relationships can be traced back to the virtue of justice, and it is possible to instil in children correct attitudes that fall within the scope of this virtue. Teachers are training their students in the virtue of justice whenever they ask them to be composed and silent during lunch, to wait their turn to speak, to avoid all forms of violence and intolerance, or to make kind gestures towards others.

Temperance orders the concupiscible appetite by moderating the legitimate desires, which mainly concern the created goods of food, drink and sex but more generally can be applied to everything a person does under the impulse of a desire. Today's children are used to having everything, and all too often, their desire becomes a *command* for those who take care of them. Accustoming children to defer the fulfilment of desires is the first step to educating children in the virtue of temperance. Moreover, the very fact of waiting for their turn during canteen service is connected both to the virtue of justice (all children have the same right to be served) and to that of temperance (everyone can wait their turn without making a drama). A misunderstanding in which one can fall is to confuse the virtue of temperance with the purpose of opposing and eliminating passions, which is proper to Stoic ethics. Aquinas's perspective is different:

> Aquinas does not advocate the elimination of passion, only its right ordering. Temperate restraint, then, is nonrepressive and informs desire rather than extinguishing it.... Aquinas distinguishes strongly between the restraint of temperance and that of continence or self-control. The mode of self-control is to restrain by *resisting* desires; the mode of temperance is to restrain by *moderating* desires. (Austin, 2017, p. 7)

Fortitude orders the irascible appetite to work in favour of achieving difficult and worthy ends by enabling hope, anger, and courage. "The notion of a 'worthy end' is essential to fortitude as a virtue because fortitude is only praiseworthy if it aligns with justice. That is, if one struggles bravely for something which is not actually good, then he is a fool, lacking sense and virtue" (Daum, 2020, p. 295). It is possible to provide childhood education in the virtue of fortitude through a multitude of small exercises involving children's endurance of fatigue and difficulties and their exercise of constancy in respecting their duties. The essential aspect is that their efforts and sacrifices are always explicitly linked to noble and worthy goals.

The cardinal virtues, considered as a whole, can be understood as the paideia of ethical life:

> Cardinal virtues are, in other words, the perfections of the intellect, the will and the sensual powers, thanks to which a specific person discovers the path of good in the complicated circumstances of daily life more efficiently, quickly, easily and, finally, follows this path. (Horowski, 2020, p. 450)

It is useful to specify that there is a close relationship between the different virtues in the sense that they constitute a sort of *spiritual organism* that can

be considered vital and healthy if all its parts are adequately formed, including with regard to the ultimate goal of virtuous action. Virtue's ultimate final cause, for Aquinas, is the overall end of the whole of human life, which he identifies with beatitude: "the virtues in this conception are qualities that ensure our lives go well as a whole by orienting us to the real, as opposed to the merely apparent or illusory, end of life" (Austin, 2017, p. 151). Actions that seem to be inspired by some of the virtues but do not tend correctly towards the true ultimate goal of human life are not really virtuous. A criminal, for example, can be apparently temperate if they decide not to drink alcohol before a robbery with the aim of being more lucid and possibly being able to escape in a car. Such behaviour, however, cannot be considered as an exercise in the virtue of temperance, not only because robbery opposes the virtue of justice but also because all of these actions are formally unjust. Aquinas speaks of counterfeit virtue (*falsa similitudo virtutis*):

> Each virtue will have its objective matter, its target, and its characteristic mode by which the target is attained. For example, temperance is about the concupiscible appetite for pleasant things; its target is what meets the need of human life; its mode is moderation. When it comes to specifying a particular virtue, how important is it to identify its twofold end (its target and the overall end)? When a habit is rightly ordered to the overall end of human life, then it is specified as a moral virtue, as distinct from a vice (which is oriented to a bad end), from an "art" (which is oriented to some particular good), or an intellectual virtue (which is oriented to some aspect of the true). However, the overall end does not distinguish one moral virtue from any other, since it is a common end that they all share. The proximate p.end or target, however,

will be specific to each particular moral virtue. (Austin, 2017, p. 153)

The paideia of virtues for character education

The idea that is stated here is that an approach to the virtues can be a valid point of reference for character education, but it is important to clarify the perspective through which we approach the virtues. Educational programmes based on virtues are not lacking in either the USA or the UK; however, they involve a risk of excessive uncertainty (Smith 2022). Virtue-based CE presents long lists of attitudes and traits of character deemed desirable, but they are chosen in ways that are, to say the least, variable.

> The most recent government advice, *Character Education Framework Guidance* (Department for Education, 2019), appears at first sight to celebrate the teaching of character virtues, listing the examples of respect, truthfulness, courage and generosity (p. 4 para. 7) and courage, honesty, generosity, integrity, humility and a sense of justice (p. 7 para 14).... Why might one school focus on humility and generosity, say, while another school does not? Is generosity particularly needed in Leeds, perhaps, but not in Manchester, while humility is just the thing for the children of rural Somerset but not those of Sheffield? What evidence could there be either for or against this? The proliferation increases. Short "case studies" of 15 schools take up pages 19–27 of Annex B. Among them these schools claim to focus on 25 particular virtues of character. The degree of variation is considerable, and often total. (Smith, 2022, p. 890)

This problem was already clearly highlighted by Alasdair MacIntyre, who, starting from a historical analysis, emphasised the following:

There are just too many different and incompatible conceptions of a virtue for there to be any real unity to the concept or indeed to the history. Homer, Sophocles, Aristotle, the New Testament, and medieval thinkers differ from each other in too many ways. They offer us different and incompatible lists of the virtues. (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 181)

Today, the sense of bewilderment that is taking shape in the face of the variety and irreconcilability of the different lists of possible virtues is even stronger. Anyone who places themselves within a sociological perspective or conducts an analysis of cultural phenomena can probably limit themselves to noting this irreconcilability, possibly studying its forms and reasons. Those who place themselves in a pedagogical perspective and set themselves educational goals have a more complex approach.

The whole educational journey, especially from a personalist perspective, has as its aim the attainment of the fullness of our capacity to act as a human person, use our intelligence critically and independently, and act responsibly with freedom. An integral part of this journey, as Corallo (1951) observes, is the progressive acquisition of those virtuous habits that will allow the right and expeditious use of freedom in doing good (and fleeing evil).

Designing paths of CE through virtues for school students entails the need to move two educational levers. On the one hand, an explicit moral education path is needed, which allows students to have awareness not only of what is right or wrong but also of the type of person they need to be to behave as is right. The classical doctrine on the cardinal virtues offers a paideia for a moral education centred on virtues that can benefit from edifying narratives (taken from children's literature) or even narratives

that represent *critical incidents* useful for activating reflection on the lack of some virtues. On the other hand, for an authentic education in the virtues, a community is necessary in which it is possible to exercise the virtues and in which reflective analysis on their exercise is facilitated. School is a place, both physical and social, where young people meet real individuals who do not belong to their family circle, which creates a multiplicity of situations in which it is necessary to implement virtuous behaviours:

When deciding to help schoolmates learn, they must demonstrate the cardinal virtue of prudence, in managing their time; justice, i.e. readiness to fulfil their obligations towards that person and other people... or towards the school; and temperance, when helping the schoolmates requires, for example, giving up the pleasure of playing with friends.... The decision to overcome stereotypes is always accompanied by the danger to be misunderstood by friends and consequently experiencing isolation. Therefore the virtue of courage is needed to establish a relationship with someone who is marginalised. Repeating similar decisions on a daily basis leads to the formation of specific character traits: justice, temperance and courage, or alternatively injustice, the pursuit of pleasure without heeding the welfare of others, and fearful conformism. (Horowski, 2020, pp. 452-453)

For this to happen, it is important to consider the school not only as the place where students are trained but also as a real educational community whose main purpose is to educate through culture (Porcarelli, 2021). The presentation of the cardinal virtues as a framework offers students a coherent set of elements that are desirable to acquire in their own character, and reflection on what happens at school (and not only at school) becomes an opportunity to

reflect on the virtues, starting from students' own experiences of life. In this process, the involvement of parents and families can be extremely useful, as the behaviours implemented at school should reflect those that take place in the family and vice versa.

Among the programmes that closely link character education and virtue, the Jubilee Centre Framework for Character Education in Schools and the Narnian Virtues curriculum should be mentioned. The Jubilee Centre project (University of Birmingham) is openly neo-Aristotelian and has a deliberately flexible structure, allowing different organisations and institutions to adapt it to their moral vision. The Jubilee Framework presents four building blocks of character: intellectual virtues, moral virtues, civic virtues and performance virtues. This is a very clear scheme from the didactic point of view, which –reread in the light of the reflections of Aquinas– is placed *upstream* of the distinction between operational powers in general and moral virtues in the strict sense. Particularly interesting is the addition in the same scheme of practical wisdom (*phronesis*), which "is the integrative virtue, developed through experience and critical reflection, which enables us to perceive, know, desire and act with good sense. This includes discerning, deliberative action in situations where virtues collide" (The Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues, 2022, p. 9). This is a very flexible scheme, which, while resonating with the Aristotelian vision, can give space to several possible *lists* of virtues. Interestingly, the working methodology takes up the Aristotelian doctrine that virtues are acquired through the conscious exercise of the acts that characterise them:

> Character virtues can be... Caught... through a positive school community, formational relationships, and a clear ethos. Taught... through the curriculum using teaching and learning strategies, activities, and resources. Sought... through chosen experiences that occur within and outside of the formal curriculum. (The Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues, 2022, p. 12)

Even more interesting is the *Narnian Virtues* curriculum (University of Leeds), which links together the methodological intuition of teaching virtues through literature with a vision of virtues that takes up and integrates the cardinal virtues. The literary texts used in this curriculum are three novels by C. S. Lewis: *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* (1989a), *Prince Caspian* (1989b) and *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (1989c). These literary texts are used as catalysts for virtues, and a rich set of methodological tools is provided for each of these three novels, including a *Teacher Handbook*, a *Student Workbook* and a *Character Passport* (to involve families). The Narnian Virtues curriculum was initially structured around 12 Narnian virtues (Pike et al., 2015, p. 77) that were subsequently merged to six, which are those currently presented in the handbook/workbook. The six Narnian virtues are as follows (Pike & Lickona, 2017, p.16-7): *wisdom* (the habit of exercising good judgement; being able to see what is true and good and choosing the best course of action), *love* (the habit of acting selflessly for the good of another, without seeking recognition or reward; love includes forgiveness and gratitude), *integrity* (the habit of being true to ourselves and truthful with others; standing up for moral principles and following our conscience), *fortitude* (the habit of doing what is right and necessary in the face of difficulty), *self-control* (the habit of self-restraint; the mastery and moderation of our desires, emotions, impulses and appetites) and *justice* (the habit of treating

everyone with equal respect and fairness; fulfilling our responsibilities).

From a comparison between the six Narnian virtues and the four cardinal virtues of Aquinas, the four cardinal virtues are sometimes proposed with the same name (justice and fortitude) and sometimes with different names (wisdom corresponds to prudence, self-control to temperance). The two virtues that are added are *love* (which highlights the specific characteristics of Christian love) and *integrity*, which represents the consistency that is always necessary in the exercise of all the virtues. In Aquinas, there is no need to introduce –among the cardinal virtues– a specific virtue that refers to love (implicitly understood in the Christian sense), as this function is carried out at a higher level by the theological virtues (faith, hope and charity) and the infused cardinal virtues. However, the choice made by the academics at the University of Leeds is interesting, as it enables the recovery of some human aspects of Christian love and proposes these as humanly positive behaviours (virtues) even for non-Christians.

Conclusions

Our culture and our society are at the centre of a real educational paradox. On the one hand, many people are asking educational institutions and schools to take charge of a social education of citizens that is also a moral education. Some attitudes deemed desirable, such as honesty, responsibility, respect and tolerance, are good, socially approved habits which could fully enter into a virtuous character education. On the other hand, today's culture is profoundly relativistic from an ethical point of view, and sometimes positions emerge that are even *hostile* towards any educational approach based on universal values. How can we get out of this paradox?

The thesis that is supported here is that it is necessary to make clear and explicit choices, proposing an education of the character based on the virtues that cannot but be inspired by a paideia. A paideia based on openly religious values could hardly be shared in a multicultural society, where the issue of religious teachings in schools is the subject of strong debate (Porcarelli, 2022). The proposal for a paideia of virtues based on the thought of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, while certainly close to Christian culture, is a philosophical –we could even say *secular*– proposal. In all his works, Aquinas himself was very careful to distinguish between what could be affirmed based only on rational arguments and what had to be based on truths of faith. The paideia of the cardinal virtues presented here is a rational proposal based on a philosophical vision (that of personalism) on which believers and non-believers can agree. It is not taken for granted that this agreement will be there, but it is interesting to at least attempt to spread –following the example of what the Universities of Birmingham and Leeds have done– an educational approach that can be evaluated on the basis of facts by those who agree to experience it, as we hope to show in future studies and research.

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