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Dynamism of human action as a key to understanding virtue education

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This article presents the dynamism of human action as a key to understanding virtue education. The dynamism of human action refers to the intentional and socially situated exercise of individuals, in particular how the faculties of the human being as agent are involved. Our proposal is framed within a neotomistic anthropological paradigm that assumes the action of the Holy Spirit in synergy with human freedom. We also present some orientations for the pedagogy of virtues based on the explanation of the dynamism of human action. This paper is an interdisciplinary work that includes elements of philosophy, theology, psychology and pedagogy.

Keywords: Virtue education; integral formation; human action; Holy Spirit; character education

Introduction

This paper is an invitation to educate in virtues, to rediscover their value and to understand how they develop. And to rediscover education not only as a result (which is presented, for example, in a graduate profile) but also as a formative process, as a mystagogy in that the educator leads the student to discover and interpret the mystery of the reality that surrounds him/her, and of his/her own life as a mystery (López González 2022). Etymologically, mystagogy refers to guiding others towards the understanding of sacred symbols or mysteries. Mysteries, therefore, are understood as realities which are not without meaning but rather exceed our understanding; realities which we can apprehend to a degree, recognise as true and accept (Newman [1870] 2010). Mystery does not refer to what is dark or hidden, but to what is too luminous or bright, for which a guide is required (Pieper 1980, [1962] 2017).

There is currently a growing interest in virtue education that has led to a reconsideration of virtue in the field of psychology as a key element in understanding human behaviour (Peterson and Seligman 2004; Vitz, Nordling, and Titus 2019). This interest is also present today in the field of higher education (Brant, Brooks, and Lamb 2022; Brooks, Brant, and Lamb 2019).

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At the same time as interest in virtue education is growing, important criticisms, some of them as old as education itself, are being raised. First, it is questioned that virtue education, particularly when linked to religion, hides a serious risk of indoctrination whereby educators impose their beliefs on students, which is inappropriate in a pluralistic society (Fiala 2024; White 2016), particularly in the university, which should limit itself to teaching and research (Fish 2004). Advocates of character education seem to seek obedience and conformity to authority (Kohn 1997). These criticisms have some value as there is a real danger of indoctrination and manipulation, for instance through unthinking emulation of pseudo-models (Han et al. 2017; Han and Graham 2023). The aversion to virtue education in some cultures can be explained by its misapplication and even identification with authoritarian regimes.

Secondly, virtue education has been questioned as to its value as an explanatory variable for human behaviour (Hartshorne and May 1928). Likewise, some psychologists and philosophers are sceptical about the claim of virtue education, giving more relevance to situational contexts (Doris 2002; Harman 2000). However, virtue education is nowadays accepted in the field of psychology for its scientific value (Fowers, Coker, and Leonhardt 2024). The dialogue between philosophy and psychology has served to respond to situationist objections (Alzola 2012). A reason expanded to the humanities is enriching the study of virtues (Case and VanderWeele 2024). Although virtue education is a complex task and, if not done in the right way, can be counterproductive, but should not be dismissed (Carr 2017; Kiss and Euben 2010; López González et al. 2023).

In the field of education, character education (which for the purposes of this paper we consider to be analogous to virtue education) is developing very strongly in countries with a Christian tradition, but also in Islamic and Confucian traditions. In fact, virtue education is as old as civilisation itself and is present in all cultures, whatever their religious matrix (Peterson and Seligman 2004). In the Greco-Latin educational tradition, the cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance) have been considered as the hinge (or *cardum*, in Latin) around which the others revolve.

Classical education (or *paideia*, in Greek) conceived that human beings require training, a certain struggle or moral exercise in order to fully develop their capacities (Jaeger 1945). According to the Greek *paideia*, education in the cardinal virtues forms the human being, bringing into play all the faculties. Education thus understood consists of educating in the virtues in order to lead a full life and reach our goal as human beings (López González 2022).

An education in the cardinal virtues is certainly noble and necessary, but it is insufficient to explain human behaviour. It can lead – in fact it happens relatively often – to an exhausting effort or obsessive perfectionism, which leads the person to procrastination, end up crying ‘I can’t’, or even ‘I don’t want to’ (Frost et al. 1990). There are important proposals of character education (e.g. Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues 2022) that offer good pedagogical guidelines for the development of the person based on reflection, motivation, and practice. However, they do not sufficiently explain the inner dynamism of moral action and how the faculties of the person are involved, which – in our opinion – is the foundation of pedagogy. On the other hand, they do not say whether the full development of the person includes a transcendent dimension and, if so, how this is combined with moral education.

Now, if God exists, as many people of different religions affirm, we must explain what role God plays in the process of integral formation. If God is more than a ‘good watchmaker’, if we consider that he influences human behaviour, we must explain

how this happens. It seems to me that it is time to recognise the central place of the Holy Spirit, who is largely unknown as an educational agent.

Dynamism of human action

The dynamism of human action refers to the intentional and socially situated exercise of individuals, and how the faculties of the human being as agent are involved. The dynamism of human action is fundamental to understanding how people interact with their environment, how they adapt to circumstances, how they learn and how they contribute to the development and transformation of society (Bandura 2006).

The complex dynamism of human action has been studied by various disciplines for many centuries. Psychology has also done so from very different perspectives. Cognitive neuroscience, developmental psychology, organisational behaviour, social psychology, or dynamical system theory indicate that ‘thoughts, feelings, and actions are influenced by a myriad of social stimuli’ (Vallacher, Read, and Nowak 2002, 265). However, there are controversies about how the interaction of thoughts, feelings and actions takes place. On the other hand, they are insufficient to explain the development of all dimensions of the human person. Likewise, the action of God is neglected or omitted. Even when transcendent virtues are admitted (Peterson and Seligman 2004), it is necessary to explain how divine action connects with human action and leads to the education of virtues and the development of the person, his or her integral formation.

Integral formation, i.e. the full and harmonious development of the human person or flourishing, can be considered as a result but also as a process in which the human person, with all his or her faculties, collaborates with the divine action that we call grace. The explanation of this divine action varies according to philosophical traditions and religions. In this article we will focus on the explanation based on the Christian tradition, in particular the Catholic tradition, which is similar to the Orthodox tradition on this point. The dynamism of human action is based on the capacity of reason and will to direct actions, intentionally, towards the good. Reason guides the will towards the choice of actions that lead to the ultimate end, while the will provides the energy and motivation necessary to carry out those actions. But what role does God play in this dynamism?

The Church Fathers use a Greek term, *synergia*, to name and explain this collaboration or process of formation of the individual, which ultimately leads to the human being acting in the divine way and being configured to Christ (Granados 2012). The exercise of virtues is a Trinitarian exercise, a divine-human act, a synergy between the free action of God and the free action of the human being, following St Maximus (Zizioulas 2003, 2016, 2018).

Synergy also applies to the integrated exercise of the human person’s faculties in the dynamism of human action. Integration, according to Malo (2019, 48) ‘consists of the union of what is originally not completely linked, or only potentially, not actually linked’. The types of integration depend on the degrees of unity.

The concept of integration makes it possible, on the one hand, to understand how a deeper union is achieved between the elements that constitute the living being, the different communities and society; on the other hand, to discover the role that the unity achieved plays in the harmonious development of differences.

Integral formation, understood as the process of educating the whole person to be what he or she is called to be, has virtue education at its core. To explain the

educational process by which virtues are developed we must turn to philosophy and theology.

Philosophical anthropology

Following the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, love is the principle of action (Aquino 1990, STh I-II q28 ad6), human beings act in search of a good, at least an apparent good; they may be mistaken, or they may be weak in achieving it, but in any case, they have a desire to achieve a supposed good that they find desirable, bringing into play their affectivity, intelligence and will, which intervene together, interacting (Pérez-Soba 2018). If this is so, then the education of the human being requires the education of these three faculties of the person: it is to educate oneself to desire the good, to think rightly and to will (and to determine to act intentionally) towards this end. The educational model must consider this dynamism: (1) the sensitive or affective appetite for what pleases the eye (i.e. beauty), (2) the intelligence of truth which is the adequacy of the subject's thought to reality and (3) the will which seeks the good, as a free commitment towards the desired valuable object. Emotions or affects, according to this dynamism, are necessary and positive. Without affection, human action would not initiate or reach completion. But the education of affectivity requires the education of the other faculties (which implies their exercise) and cannot be achieved apart from them. And likewise, the education of the intelligence or the will. Character education integrates moral knowledge, moral sentiment, and moral decision-action (Lickona 1999).

The dynamism of human action is ordered towards the good. Virtues, as capacities, are not the end of action. Virtues are like flowers without which, as good dispositions or habits of operation, there can be no fruit. Flourishing can be defined as 'a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good' (VanderWeele 2017). But the flower is ordered to the fruit. From the Thomistic perspective, flourishing resembles the virtuous life whose fruit or ultimate end is beatitude (Aquino 1990, STh I-IIae q70 a1). Flourishing is not the ultimate end in either people or plants. We do not do good in order to be happy, to flourish; good is the end of our actions (Hauerwas 1990). Virtues are flowers that enable us to do good, which is the fruit. Prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance – the exercise of all the virtues – is ordered to a life in communion, compatible with tribulations and vulnerability (López González et al. 2023).

Theological anthropology

This is why a second anthropological consideration is indispensable, this time a theological one: human beings are made to live in communion with God and with others. This is his beatitude, his full *eudaimonia* or good life. Human beings are not fulfilled by good, truth and beauty that are not an expression of communion, whose logic of gift implies giving, receiving, and sharing. Paraphrasing Augustine (Agustín 1979), we can affirm that we have been made for this communion (with God and others, which already begins in this earthly life) and our hearts are restless until they rest in it. Now, to attain this communion is grace, it is a gift of God that we freely accept. The dynamism of human action must be understood as a response to the prior gift of an inwardly moving love (Pérez-Soba 2018). 'An ontological gratuity thus marks the heart of all created being that when actualized turns the world to

its source through communion with God' (Newman 2018, 42). The gift is a disposition to receive the action of the Holy Spirit who penetrates our spirit, our freedom, and virtues, inspiring and impelling us to act in conjunction with Him. Our will and the Holy Spirit work together as if forming a common principle (Pinckaers 2005).

The fact that there is a primacy of grace does not mean that it takes place outside our freedom. The good life, the full virtuous life, is the fruit of human-divine synergy, of the action of the Holy Spirit at work in us, with our free cooperation. There is a phrase that sums up this dynamism of human action: 'the more God acts, the more man acts' (Granados 2012, 637). This does not mean that the more God acts the less the human being acts: less appetite, less intelligence, less will. This would imply that God's action crushes human action, when the opposite is true, for 'grace does not annul nature but perfects it' (Aquino 1990, STh I q1 a8 ad2).

How does this collaboration come about? Following the Christian tradition, and in particular St. Thomas Aquinas, the Holy Spirit comes with his gifts, giving us a spiritual instinct, which comes to the aid of our weakness and leads us to the full truth and the true good (cf. Jn 16, 13). He guides us to full human action: to desire more, to think better, to want good. The Holy Spirit heals the appetites and gives vigour; he enlightens the intelligence and inclines the will and the affections towards what is good (Pinckaers 2005). In short, the good life, the fully virtuous life, is only possible in cooperation with the Holy Spirit. It is then that virtues flourish and bear fruit. Therefore, we should not be afraid of the action of grace as if it could destroy our rational nature or freedom; on the contrary, grace empowers our reason and freedom. But on the other hand, neither should we fear nature as if it were contrary to grace.

Aquinas insists on this role of the Holy Spirit. St. Thomas speaks of cultivating a spiritual instinct that enables us to know by connaturality what is good and true, to crave it and to will it, thus empowering our affectivity and will, our freedom. Some people develop this instinct without calling it that, perhaps without recognising the action of the Holy Spirit, but it is no less true that the Holy Spirit is at work in them: 'whoever seeks truth and goodness seeks God, whether he knows it or not' (Stein 2002, 1251). In other words, Aquinas points to this action of the Holy Spirit when he says: *Omne verum a quocumque dicatur a Spiritu sancto est* (I Sent d19 q5 a2 ad 5; I Sent d46 a4 ex.; II Sent d28 a5 ag1). Our double anthropological consideration is the basis for an adequate pedagogy of the virtues, which we will present schematically in the following section.

Pedagogy of virtues

The pedagogy of virtues must be based on the dynamism of human action to be efficacious; otherwise, it would be like trying to teach without knowing how the student learns. The action of educators (e.g. teachers) must take this dynamism into account. The following are some general recommendations for virtue education, in the light of the conceptualisation of the dynamism of human action presented above.

Education in virtues through projects involving positive action

The acquisition of virtues, although a valid educational objective, must consider that people are not usually concerned specifically or directly with becoming virtuous, but rather have projects or goals whose achievement requires them to develop virtue (Snow 2016). Therefore, in order to educate in virtues, the most appropriate way is

to propose good projects or goals to learners that involve them, through action, developing virtues.

Virtues and competences are stable dispositions – capacities or potentialities, in Aristotelian language – that are ordered to acts, to positive actions. When the person acts well (and only then) the virtues develop as an indirect effect, the person is educated. In this sense Spaemann (2003) points out that education and the virtues themselves are to be considered an indirect effect. Virtues are a result of seeking goods other than virtues in the first instance. Thus, the motivation to act must not be to achieve the virtues as an end, but to achieve a good.

Paradoxical though it may seem, what we must propose is not so much to be virtuous, well-educated, well-trained, with excellent skills, but to desire and act the good, the greatest good, with all our heart, all our soul and all our strength.

Education in virtue in collaboration with the Holy Spirit

However, for this human action to be fully effective, it must be carried out in collaboration with the Holy Spirit, as the Inner Teacher who leads us to the full truth (Agustín 2009). As educators we have to provide the conditions for a good relationship between the Inner Teacher and our students. The role of the educator or the school (including the religious school) is to provide the best possible conditions for this relationship (Horowski 2020). The teacher is a pedagogue in the original sense of one who accompanies (*agó*, in Greek) the child into the mystery. His work is mystical in the sense that he guides the child to discover and to read the mystery or meaning of human life (López González 2022).

We talk a lot about the relationship being key in the educational process – and it is – but above all the good relationship of the students with God. For this it is important that our students learn to see reality with a deeper look, which will make them discover the presence and action of God. And to pray, which is to enter into communication with God, to listen to Him, to dialogue with Him. One of the effects of this relationship with the Holy Spirit is docility to his inspirations and even a *docibilitas* whereby the person acquires a spiritual intelligence or wisdom by scrutinising reality and freely takes the initiative from a bold trust in the Lord (Cencini 2000).

Education in virtues must also include the theological virtues

The relationship with God leads to the development of the theological virtues. It is important that students develop the moral virtues but also the theological virtues. The moral virtues are rooted in the theological virtues that adapt man's faculties to participation in the divine way of loving. The theological virtues are a free response to a gratuitous invitation of God, which results in beatitude, communion. Just as certain competencies prepare the development of moral virtues, certain moral virtues prepare the development of theological virtues: humility, which prepares faith; magnanimity, which prepares hope; mercy, which prepares charity or agape. Humility opens our eyes, our intelligence, to the truth. Magnanimity makes us fearless in the search for the good. Mercy leads us to seek that good for others. These three moral virtues (which we can call transcendent) facilitate the action of the Spirit who in fact impels us to openness to others.

Between these three theological virtues there is an intimate relationship and a primacy of charity, which is the divine way of loving: *Deus charitas est* (1 Jn 4, 8).

Charity, the love of God, is the origin, motor and fruit of full human action. The dynamism of human action, informed by charity, thus connects with the dynamism of divine action. Charity performs not only a regulatory but also an integrative function of emotions, as well as intelligence and will (Pérez-Soba 2021). Maritain (1962) points out in this respect that it is only when there is charity that education achieves its end; charity that is not developed by applying a technical method but by removing the obstacles that prevent love, and by educating in the moral virtues.

The transcendent virtues are a manifestation of the action of God who freely overflows, configures us to Christ and deifies us (*theosis*, in Greek), making us live in communion with God and with others. *Theosis* or transformation in Christ is not the reduction of the human, but its full realisation (Finlan and Kharlamov 2010).

Education in the moral virtues must include the development of intellectual virtues

Moral virtues are not unrelated to values: as we have already mentioned, the cognitive and affective appreciation of a value is a trigger for virtuous human action. Without intellectual virtues, the other virtues cannot be developed. Virtue requires acting well, for the right reasons, which does not necessarily imply discursive reasoning but an inner dialogue of the agent to deliberate judge and elect well (Maritain 1951; Pérez-Soba 2018).

Education in intellectual virtues must also be integrated, which cannot be separated from education in moral virtues (Baehr 2013; Miller 2021; Zagzebski 1996) or transcendent virtues. In any case, the promotion of virtues must not undermine or inhibit the freedom of choice that is a *sine qua non* of virtuous action or conduct (Carr 2017). Likewise, acting well certainly requires good intentions and intellectual habits, but also good execution or competence. Virtues require the development of competencies that in some cases are like the virtues attached to them, especially personal competencies that are habitual dispositions for good moral performance (López González et al. 2023).

To educate well in the intellectual virtues requires implementing several strategies: (1) a supportive institutional culture, (2) direct instruction, (3) self-reflection and self-assessment, (4) making explicit connections between course material and the intellectual virtues and vices, (5) opportunities to practice the intellectual virtues (6) understanding, (7) integrating virtue concepts into formal and informal assessments, and (8) modelling (Baehr 2013).

Virtue education requires an appropriate pedagogical model

Education in virtues requires a pedagogical model for its application. At the Francisco de Vitoria University (2021), a model has been developed that consists of three steps: awakening, discovering, and deciding, which connects with the human faculties: affectivity, intelligence and will (Universidad Francisco de Vitoria 2021). In ‘awakening’ the person is affected by beauty (or suffering) of reality, in ‘discovering’ the truth, the intelligence intervenes above all, in ‘deciding’ to do good the will is the prevailing faculty. This model responds to the dynamism of human action and at the same time is consistent with experiential pedagogical models (e.g. Kolb 2014).

Experiential methodologies are best suited for the development of virtues as Aristotle once pointed out: virtues are developed through their practice, provided it is an intentional and reflective practice. And they must be carried out in community, with

other peers with whom to practice these virtues together (leadership programmes, social action programmes or pilgrimages are good ways to do this). But they can also be applied in the classroom, including in subject guides appropriate teaching methodologies such as service learning, project-based learning, art, or traditional methodologies that connect with the learner and foster meaningful learning for the learner (Universidad Francisco de Vitoria 2021).

Virtue education needs to be supported by research and formative evaluation

Research on virtues is not easy because they are complex constructs and because there is a risk of interfering with the educational process (López González et al. 2023; Wright, Warren, and Snow 2021). However, an assessment that respects the nature and agents of the educational process, giving them tools for improvement, is possible and desirable.

Many empirical studies in recent years have evaluated and measured the impact of virtue education programmes in both schools and universities. A meta-analysis of the research indicates that character education programmes as a whole, have a significant effect on a wide range of outcome variables (school behaviour, academic achievement, attendance, problem-solving, interpersonal competency, etc.), but outcomes improve when the programmes are accompanied by mentoring (Brown et al. 2023; Johnson et al. 2022).

Other important research finding is that the ranking of mean scores on the cardinal virtues and their associated competencies (or character strengths) is very similar across countries, which may reveal something about universal human nature (McGrath 2015; Park, Peterson, and Seligman 2006). Likewise, studies indicate that our students generally perceive themselves to be high in virtues such as prudence and justice, but low in fortitude and, above all, temperance. Indirectly, students are asking for help in learning to manage their emotions and affective education, which has not traditionally been included as an educational objective at university level.

Virtue education requires teachers who are witnesses

Students consider that some teachers, perhaps without realising it, are crucial in the moral and existential direction of their lives, particularly in the education of freedom (Fernández Espinosa and López González 2023b). Teachers are aware of their responsibility in the moral education of students, whatever subject they teach, and at the same time they are aware of their lack of preparation in this field. For an educator, the most important thing is not so much to be a role model as to appeal to the known truth and good, to be a witness to the truth and good that we teach, to enlighten others with the known, contemplated truth (Aquino 1994, STh II-II q188 a6). To be a witness is not to be a perfect model (no one fully lives all dimensions of life) but to bear witness to the known truth, even if it is not fully lived. More than presenting models of life, it is necessary to present lessons of life (Fernández Espinosa and López González 2023a).

Human beings know how to appreciate and recognise the values that are announced to them, even if the educator lives them inadequately. Accepting a testimony is not the same as blindly believing the word of another; it is a path to moral understanding that includes a component of cognitive grasping on the part of those receiving the testimony. Both the one who offers a testimony and the one who receives it must do epistemic work (Croce 2020).

Conclusion

This article aims to contribute to virtue education by offering as key a sound understanding of the dynamism of human action. The dynamism of human action, in synergy with divine action, is ordered towards the good that ultimately is communion with God and with others. This synergy or collaboration is a mystery rather than a problem, to use Marcel's terminology ([1935] 1995).

Based on this dynamism, a pedagogy is proposed in which the person develops the virtues as a result of being engaged in the achievement of some good.

Educators should facilitate the conditions for students to have this intrinsic motivation and to be able to have a good relationship with God and with others, which will have the indirect effect of developing moral, intellectual, and transcendent virtues. This requires an experiential educational model that connects with the human faculties (affectivity, intelligence and will), and an evaluation of this model that allows for its improvement. Finally, the teacher must first and foremost be a witness to enlighten others with the known, contemplated truth.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

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