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# *Should Wellbeing Be a Goal of Schooling?*

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*Several philosophers and psychologists of education have taken the position that wellbeing should be at the heart of our educational system, if not its primary goal. The aim of this paper is to outline, question, and challenge this position. It starts by discussing the main approaches that consider student wellbeing as the primary goal of the educational system – the propositions of positive psychology and those of certain educational philosophers and psychologists. It follows with an examination of some major social critiques of the idea of wellbeing as a goal of schooling. Drawing mainly on Foucault, the paper questions the extent to which the aim of wellbeing contributes to normalization and hinders the possibility of self-government. The paper concludes that wellbeing should not be conceived as a goal, but rather as an ongoing preoccupation of care for the self.*

## Introduction

The wellbeing of students in school is a worldwide social concern today. It constitutes one of the fundamental aims of contemporary educational systems. Students' experience of stress, anxiety, and depression is a major source of worry for the actors of educational systems, so much so that it warrants government intervention. The OECD has even begun measuring student wellbeing: in 2015, it commissioned a Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study to be carried out in 72 countries (OECD, 2017). The study concluded that, depending on the country, 12 to 20% of 15-year-old students reported a high level of dissatisfaction with their lives and a considerable degree of uneasiness in school.

National policies reflect in quite different ways the concern for student wellbeing in school. In 2014, the French Ministry of Education published *Une école bienveillante*, which provides guidelines for spontaneous interventions when students are in particular need. In 2005, the UK Department for Education issued a publication that listed the social emotional skills that students should learn in school to ensure their healthy development, and which would help lead to their success later in life. Even the countries that foster competitiveness and are particularly focused on academic performance have begun to institute policies mindful of student wellbeing. For example, certain schools in South Korea have introduced school terms without academic assessment (OECD, 2017). Although the policies implemented for the wellbeing of students may vary from country to country, they bear witness to a common concern: the responsibility of the school in the face of student stress, anxiety, and depression.

Two major discourses account for this new concern. The first, held primarily by the OECD, regards student wellbeing as a necessary condition for learning, for performing, and for contributing to the economic development of a country. The second, resulting from the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, regards wellbeing more and more as an inalienable right (Bradshaw, 2019, p. 97).

Dating back to progressive theorists of the early 20th century, through the radical deschooling and libertarian education movement of the 1960s and 1970s, when many theorists were influenced by psychoanalysis and trends in humanistic psychology, and until recent advances in psychology and the neurosciences, educational theorists and psychologists have taken the position that wellbeing should be at the heart of our educational system, if not its primary goal. Others, on the contrary, have denounced this project as ill-informed or even dangerous. The aim of this paper is twofold. First, it provides an overview of key positions in this ongoing debate over wellbeing as an aim of schooling and argues that what mainly separates the defenders and their opponents is the idea that an education aiming at wellbeing contributes to students' autonomy, or their capacity to "self-govern." Following this overview, the paper then discusses Michel Foucault's work on self-government to problematize the very notion of autonomy and to develop a middle-ground framework in which wellbeing is conceived as an ongoing concern for the care of the self rather than as an ideal or non-ideal model to be attained. The main claim is that the pedagogical approaches developed and implemented as part of a focus on students' wellbeing *can* end up inhibiting their possibilities for developing autonomy through a form of normalization and through enacting forms of subjectification, but can also prevent this and even be liberatory if treated with caution. To put it differently, what is argued for is a form of *via negativa* in which teachers and other educationists should refrain from defining wellbeing, happiness, or flourishing in advance and consider the question as one that should remain open for the students to explore themselves.

## Wellbeing as an Overarching Aim of Schooling

An aim or a goal is a statement of principles or ideals that stem from values, from philosophical ideas, and from the aspirations of a social group or a society. In education, goals are set in terms of exit profiles: at the end of their educational journey, students will ideally have such and such qualities and such and such skills, and they will conduct themselves in such and such manner. The notion of a goal, therefore, cannot be dissociated from the acts undertaken to reach it (Gross & Prandi, 2004). Indeed, if student wellbeing must be a *goal*, we must have "a clear picture of what wellbeing is," as John White puts it (2011, p. 2).

The ample literature we have on the subject shows that there are various conceptions of wellbeing and more specifically student wellbeing. Some are more individualistic while others are more collective; some are subjective (determined on the basis of how people feel, or report to be feeling) while others are objective (determined on the basis of an objective, universal set of goods or conditions), or a mixture of the two (Bradshaw, 2019; Kristjánsson, 2017). Amongst these conceptions, there is the *hedonistic* view (wellbeing as the experience of positive or negative states, and in particular states of satisfaction) and the *eudaimonic* view (which defines wellbeing as independence, acceptance of oneself, and having a meaningful life). The present format does not allow me to elaborate on these distinctions. What is important to keep in mind, however, is that despite concerns about not imposing a singular norm and defining for others what makes for a happy life, it seems, nevertheless, impossible to discuss wellbeing as a final goal of schooling without establishing some set of normative features. In support of this argument, let us briefly examine some contemporary conceptions theorized in the literature today according to which wellbeing should be a main goal of schooling.

Positive psychology is certainly the most influential approach today in defining wellbeing as a goal of schooling in educational and political discourses. Developed in the work of Martin Seligman in the 1980s and 1990s, it is generally adopted by international institutions such as the OECD, and it is at the heart of a rising number of pedagogical initiatives across the world under the banner of "positive education." According to this line of thinking, emotional wellbeing is made up of a set of social emotional features that should be cultivated in individuals (Seligman, 2002). These psychologists, contrary to classical psychologists, who study the mentally ill and the deviant, began to study people who consider themselves happy, optimistic, and accomplished, to identify the correlative traits of character (e.g.,

compassion, pro-social tendencies, altruism) and thus provide the means to develop these traits and enable people to lead happier lives. The PERMA model is the result of these studies. It synthesizes the five major components of happiness: positive emotions, positive engagement, positive relationship, positive meaning, and positive accomplishment (Seligman and al., 2009). More recently positive health was added to the list (ibid.). To help students acquire these traits, different educational practices have seen the light of day. Indeed, some of these have been included in the school timetable of many schools around the world, especially in America – through writing exercises, group discussion, life coaching, problem resolution, and meditation exercises – with a view of teaching students to realign their learned explanatory styles, to de-dramatize situations, to regulate their emotions, to reinforce their social skills, or to increase their motivation (Seligman, 2007). The skills that these techniques are supposed to foster are intended to teach students to lead more positive, more self-responsible, and happier lives.

Similarly, self-determination theorists (SDT) also argue that there are universal human needs, the satisfaction of which is central to human flourishing. Also, through empirical research, their project consists in determining the elements of human experience that are the most conducive to human thriving (Ryan, Curren, & Deci, 2013). However, the approach differs from positive psychology in that according to these theorists, conceptions of happiness that derive from positive psychology (developing certain traits of character) do not produce an appropriate account of what is required for a human to thrive (Ryan and Martela, 2016). Happiness, they argue, derives from a good, worthwhile *way of living*; it is only a "byproduct" of a way of life that is rich and meaningful. Hence, it cannot really be sought out in and for itself, which would explain why materialistic ways of living do not tend to produce happiness in the end. Such a way of living may include "pursuing intrinsic goals, living autonomously, being mindful, being benevolent" (ibid., p. 1). Hence, proponents of SDT do not define the traits of happiness per se that should be acquired, but rather identify ways of living that can make for a good and flourishing life and might indirectly make one happy.

Many other philosophical accounts (i.e., Brighouse, 2006; White, 2001; Kristjánsson, 2016; Noddings, 2003) follow a similar line of argument. They consider it possible to identify what it means to live a good and flourishing life, one that feels both satisfying and meaningful, and that has objective value, and proceed to characterize the good life to be pursued through educational policies or practices. White (2001) for example, who is much influenced by the work of James Griffin (1989) and Joseph Raz (1986), recognizes that certain (pre)conditions are necessary for human flourishing (i.e., social, economic, political, physical, and psychological conditions) and argues that "[a] fulfilling life is built around successful and wholehearted, intrinsically motivated involvement in worthwhile activities" (p. 64). After a discussion about what makes for a worthwhile activity, he discusses the question of how the school can and should contribute to students' capacity to lead flourishing lives and suggests changes that could be made to the traditional curriculum to offer more fulfilling possibilities. Similarly, Harry Brighouse (2006) defines flourishing using Richard Layard's "big seven" elements (Layard, 2011) that influence happiness (i.e., financial situation, family relationships, work, community and friends, health, personal freedom, and personal values) and considers that schooling should equip students to lead flourishing lives by offering a rich curriculum. He also claims that the question of happiness should be addressed more directly in schools, that students should learn about family life, parenting, emotional development, work–life balance, how to organize their finances, what flourishing is, the place of consumption, and how to use leisure time (ibid., pp. 54–55). As will be discussed later, he offers a rich reflection on the extent to which it is legitimate to define wellbeing, or flourishing, in advance for students and how this relates to the autonomy of students. Kristján Kristjánsson (2016), for his part, considers that these views of flourishing, although compelling, are missing something important, what he calls a certain fullness, a sense of transcendence, and suggests that philosophers of education should adopt an extended or more enchanted view of flourishing, one that includes transpersonal values, ecstatic experiences, that is to say, "emotions directed at ideals or idealisations, such as beauty, truth and goodness" (p. 8). According to Kristjánsson, this enchanted view need not be supernaturalistic, although he considers that theistic religions and works of art may be important resources for this type of flourishing. Again, in wanting to enrich the meaning

of flourishing, what is searched for is a predefined understanding of what it means to be happy or lead a flourishing life.

In the line of thought of the ethics of care, Nel Noddings (2003) also advocates that schools should teach in such a way as to enhance student happiness. Again, she also acknowledges the existence of a variety of ways of conceiving the good life and the impossibility of imposing a single conception of the good. Her discussion of the subject is nuanced and acknowledges the complexity of the issues involved. Nevertheless, she cannot avoid defining the values and the dispositions that the school should instill and cultivate in students so that they may lead happy lives in the present and in the future. The distinctive feature of her argument is to highlight a relational approach to wellbeing by acknowledging the importance of the interdependence of subjects and the creation of conditions that allow for mutually supportive relationships – like those that should exist in the home. Noddings goes on to list certain qualities to the development of which the school should contribute: "politeness, wit, cultivated taste, unhurried serenity, a talent for listening, hospitality (and) the ability to respond positively to others and not just to fulfill assigned duties" (ibid., p. 35). There are very marked differences in language and focus between the propositions put forward by positive psychology, Noddings, and liberal philosophers of education. Positive psychology emphasizes the acquisition of skills and the adoption of positive attitudes such as optimism, commitment, and resilience, while Noddings defines, albeit in a nuanced manner, the interpersonal qualities that must be fostered to build a happy society: attentiveness, hospitality, listening. The specific qualities that contribute to human flourishing are not postulated by liberal philosophers of education. But they do propose an idea of what a flourishing subject is – that is, one who engages in objectively worthwhile and meaningful activities.

As Wolbert, De Ruyter, and Schinkel (2019) have argued, these accounts mostly rely on an ideal theory approach (p. 29). Their aim is to clarify and conceptualize this very notion of wellbeing, happiness, flourishing, or the good life and use it as a guiding principle for action, from which to derive educational practices and policies. They are careful in not giving too much of a substantive definition of what the good life should look like, but still they portray an idealized image, or vision, of what is aimed for. According to the authors, an ideal theory can lack in relevance if it fails to take into consideration much of real-life complexities: "too many parents, schools and children are so far removed from the ideal that describing an ideal blueprint has little meaning," they say (ibid., p. 35). The authors then outline a "nonideal theory approach" and discuss two options. The first, in line with Amartya Sen's capability approach (2002), is that we should focus on the needs of children in particular contexts and theorize how these can be met in real life, and the other is that we should take contextual variables into account in theorizing the ideal itself. This would be a form of realistic idealism in which theory is concerned with what is possible in real-life situations. These are very important points, however the notion that there is a predominant model of happiness or flourishing, and that there should be one, even if it is more realistic and non-ideal, seems to remain. The question I would like to address in the next section is to what extent the meaning of wellbeing or flourishing should be predefined at all.

## Normalizing Effects of Student Wellbeing as an Aim: Some Criticisms

Against the notion that wellbeing should be if not the main aim of schooling, then one of its priorities, many critics have argued that wellbeing or flourishing should in no way be predefined and considered as an aim. Even scholars from the flourishing tradition itself have started to doubt its relevance as an educational aim. For example, in his paper on the educational virtue of flourishing, Carr claims that "flourishing is limited to the shaping of affect and appetite for fairly basic character developmental purposes and serves to identify no very clear, common, or uncontroversial moral or other educational aims" (2021, p. 405). The arguments vary considerably and draw on different traditions of thought, but one aspect that runs through most of them, and that will be the focus of this section, is the idea that defining wellbeing as an aim, through ideal or non-ideal theory, cannot do away with the issue of

determining in advance a norm of happiness or flourishing, of what a flourishing student should be, do, or look like. This might ultimately reveal itself to be problematic, especially from an educational standpoint, because the normativity that is embedded in any definition of wellbeing or flourishing, and the practices that follow, may hinder the possibility for students to define what is a good and flourishing life for themselves in the end. As we shall see, predefined models of wellbeing or flourishing may contribute to the development of pedagogical practices that influence and shape subjectivities in paternalistic ways.

The first critical stance that argues in this direction is one defended by Kathryn Ecclestone and Dennis Hayes, according to whom the focus on student wellbeing or flourishing has led to a dangerous "therapeutic turn" in education (2008). Authors following this line of thought generally refer to a specific cultural trend coined the "self-esteem movement," inspired by humanist psychology, which was itself a reaction to what was previously seen as an overemphasis on instructional concerns in schools. Against traditional views of schooling, many psychologists have developed theories and practices that were more sensitive to the "whole child development," to his or her inner life, and the importance of social and emotional skills. Several cultural critics have denounced these trends for creating individualistic subjects incapable of founding communities (Rieff, 1966; Lasch, 1979) or for creating vulnerable people who interpret everything they experience according to their inner life and feelings (Furedi, 2004). Similarly, some have argued that focusing too much on our feelings and on experiences of closeness and warmth with others can make it difficult for someone to form a public self. Richard Sennett (1992), for example, argues that although developing such a public figure may arguably be criticized for creating a sense of self that is impersonal or inauthentic (because it relies primarily on the superego, which in Freud's framework is a self that has been distorted by social conventions), it may contribute to the development of a certain self-detachment (a distance with the purely instinctual *id*), which serves as a layer of protection against the aggressions of public life. Following this line of thought, Ecclestone and Hayes (2008) argue that the concern for students' inner life and self-esteem, and the rise of pedagogical activities (e.g., drawing "feeling" trees, having circle time) designed specifically to make students feel at ease, and to let them express their emotions, paradoxically produces the opposite result in that they bring to the fore concerns that, generally speaking, students did not have before: "They normalize the bad experiences of a minority of children as universal difficulties that 'we all have'" (p. 44). In other words, they consider that the emotional wellbeing agenda relies on a diminished view of human potential that undermines development and contributes to labelling. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, Ecclestone and Hayes (2008) contend that the wish to protect students from all negative emotions and the expectation that all students should acquire self-confidence, learn with enthusiasm, and develop a certain emotional intelligence, ends up formatting the way children must experience and express their emotions and the way in which they must experience academic learning. As they put it, it imposes an "orthodoxy of appropriate feeling" (ibid., p. 42). They give many different examples of ways in which school practices impose the norms of what is deemed appropriate to students, through smoothing transitions (breathing or meditation exercises, for example), nurture groups (discussion sessions about emotions, for example), or assessment practices, or through the existing curriculum (reflective writing, for example), imposing ways of making sense of things and themselves that are "almost impossible to challenge" (ibid., p. 45).

In a somehow similar way, many contemporary critics argue that the dominant conceptions of wellbeing, informed most notably by positive psychology and the cognitive sciences, promote practices and values that contribute to the shaping of neoliberal subjectivities (Dardot & Laval, 2009; Cabanas and Illouz, 2019). In its report on the wellbeing of students, the OECD (2017) states the importance of creating a school environment that is conducive to wellbeing by underscoring the importance of learning certain skills: how to be optimistic, develop self-control, be able to work with others, or be able to choose one's academic and professional career (pp. 236–241). These social and emotional skills are meant to help students foster positive emotions, be motivated, feel responsible for the course of their studies, and know how to self-regulate efficiently in order to be successful. Such ideas reflect to various degrees some key aspects of the literature on the aim of wellbeing and the ideal of helping students lead autonomous,

meaningful lives, but many also argue that this is a delusion. As Kingfisher (2013) puts is, it is no coincidence that positive thinking, self-regulation, self-examination, and entrepreneurialism, which are the qualities promoted in wellbeing discourses and practices (such as meditation classes, problem-resolution techniques, self-regulation of emotions techniques, and the like) are also the qualities required for the neoliberal economy.

In line with a Foucauldian perspective (to which I will return later), the notion that wellbeing should be an aim of schooling is interpreted as an instrument for the fabrication of neoliberal or entrepreneurial subjects who should be flexible, responsible, proactive, and adapted for the benefit of the economic system. This argument has been developed extensively, for example in a paper provocatively intitled "Making Little Neo-Liberals: The Production of Ideal Child/Learner Subjectivities in Primary School through Choice, Self-Improvement and 'Growth Mindsets'" (Bradbury, 2019). It has also been carefully analyzed in the context of the importation of mindfulness and yoga in schools (see, for example, Jackson, 2019) and the importation of self-regulation techniques more broadly (see, for example, Schwimmer, 2021). In this framework, wellbeing techniques in schools are interpreted as part of a neoliberal apparatus of governmentality, which involves state incentives for self-government in line with the competitive logic of neoliberalism.

A predefined model of wellbeing or flourishing, such as the PERMA model, is considered worrisome not only because it is aligned with the economic demands of our time, but more broadly perhaps because it imposes a one-size-fits-all model of happiness based on positivity. Referring to the work of Sara Ahmed (2010), Jackson and Bingham (2018) argue that "happiness can be used in communities as a tool to maintain a status quo that does not intrinsically aid the cultivation of all members' happiness equally" (p. 228). Ahmed has shown quite convincingly how happiness has served historically as a justification for different forms of assimilation. For example, on the pretext that Indigenous people were not "happy" according to established Western expectations, it seemed justified to civilize them. Even if the wish for them to find happiness might have been sincere, what was wished for was that they would find happiness without compromising the established equilibrium of Western societies, thus imposing a moral order for all. The same may be said about the place of women in society, as it is often expected that they find happiness without disrupting their assigned role as good girls or home keepers, for example. The woman who refuses to be happy in her assigned role might be seen as acting in bad faith or being a "killjoy" (Ahmed, 2010). This view sees happiness as an individualized and internalized matter, a question of personal choice in which the person is responsible for being happy or not (Jackson & Bingham, 2018). Some personal characteristics or qualities are deemed important for *my* flourishing (optimism, wit, empathy, purpose), *I* have the internal capacity to develop them through various forms of exercises, and hence, *I* should make sure to develop them. This psychologized view fails to recognize that emotions are also very much relational and that requiring that someone be happy may be oppressive in some contexts. Drawing on this, Jackson and Bingham claim that the expectation that every student should find happiness fails to acknowledge that unequal, pre-existing social and political conditions and relations might understandably prevent equal flourishing for all. Moreover, they are concerned that the wellbeing agenda, with its injunction to feel happy, may be used as an instrument to make students, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds, compliant and ensure that they accept and maintain the status quo.

Finally, against the notion that wellbeing should be an aim of schooling, many have developed an argument inspired by existentialism. Suffering and pain are complex, paradoxical, and inevitable dimensions of human existence and thus schools should give them more importance. In his book *Happiness, Hope, and Despair*, Peter Roberts (2015) contends that schooling should play an important role in helping young people to learn about and to better understand human suffering. He argues that it is normal and even desirable that school should be a source of some discomfort, doubt, and uneasiness, seeing how these feelings can help us grow as individuals by forcing us take a step back. The existentialist philosopher Kierkegaard (1989), for example, sees despair as a distinguishing and meritorious human feature that anyone should be aware of. It is a matter of self-consciousness in a way. In a world in which

we expect students to be open-minded, that is, open to revising their first order beliefs, some form of anguish is to be expected (ibid.). According to this line of argument, then, wellbeing as a goal carries the risk of diverting our attention from the educational potential of discomfort or even of suffering caused, for instance, either by the obligation to participate in activities that one initially finds senseless or by finding oneself involved in disharmonious situations or relationships. Hence, the idea of a wellbeing-centred school could prove counterproductive. Judith Suissa (2008, p. 82) also reminds us, for example, that education is challenging, unsettling, and possibly liberating in a manner that entails pain and that happiness-oriented education seeks to avoid such an experience. She argues that the criterion of life satisfaction on which positive psychology relies, although holistic, is an insufficient expression of what makes for a life well lived. It does not account for the value, the importance, and the meanings that people ascribe to their experiences, nor to the complexity of the meaning-making processes that underlie them. In other words, it seems impossible to develop a predefined understanding of wellbeing or flourishing that includes all the nuances and complexity of an actual life. Hence, a definition will always be somewhat reductive and serve as an orientation that might prove alienating for some, in some contexts.

It could be argued that the philosophical approaches discussed earlier give rich and fine accounts of happiness, or flourishing, that do take the existential, moral, relational, and even political aspects of existence into consideration, acknowledging the importance of developing meaningful relationships or some transcendental values that makes a life meaningful, for example. Indeed, many approaches described above recognize this complexity. Although they might not be normalizing in a strict sense of imposing one and only one definition of the good life, such accounts remain in some way paternalistic in the sense that they cannot do without having to define to some extent what makes for a flourishing life for someone else, as Brighouse acknowledges (2006, p. 42).

Indeed, according to Brighouse, this paternalistic dimension, although it makes some feel uncomfortable, is inevitable in any educational endeavour. He argues it is the role of parents, teachers, and school administrators to determine, in part, what is best for children, for their development and their future, and thus they have a legitimate authority when it comes to bringing up and educating children (ibid., p. 43). He gives examples such as forcing children to eat their vegetables or practising piano or studying. Notwithstanding the problem of whether the state school should indeed have such an authority, one can readily recognize that there might be a difference between coercing a child into learning about literature or science, and initiating him or her to a particular way of living a good life. They both act on an emotional and aesthetic level, but the latter touches the fundamental ethical question of how to live in a more direct way, and of how to choose to live authentically. Imposing a certain language and ways to go about it seems to run against the liberal value of individual freedom that most wellbeing scholars are trying to defend in the first place. Anticipating such criticism, Brighouse insists: "I do not say that they should be forced to live their lives in a particular way"; the schools' paternalistic duty is not to decide for the children, but "to provide children with plentiful opportunities to develop the resources for a flourishing life" (ibid, p. 52). However, this distinction seems to rely on a particular understanding of what it means to decide how to live for oneself, of what it means to be autonomous and be able to govern oneself.[1] And one could ask to what extent developing those "resources that make for a flourishing life" actually allows one to decide freely. The next two sections examine this question.

## On Self-Government

As mentioned, authors who argue for wellbeing, happiness, or flourishing as an aim of schooling generally consider autonomy to be a fundamental part of what it entails, because people vary in the kind of life that will enable them to flourish, and for this reason, they should have the opportunity to enter ways of

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[1] It might be anecdotal, but it seems interesting to note that most proponents of wellbeing as an aim are men while critics are mainly women, as if they had a particular sensitivity regarding such paternalistic views.

living that were not predetermined for them by the way they were brought up (see, for example, Brighouse, 2006, p. 15). For people to really flourish, they must identify with a conception of the good life that is objectively good and they must do so "from the inside" (ibid., p. 17), which "requires the resources and liberties that justice requires for people to live well by their own judgement" (ibid., p. 18). This means that students who come from a variety of backgrounds, for example, should be exposed to authentic alternative ways of living, and that they should learn the reflective skills that will allow them to choose autonomously between real alternatives (pp. 18–19). This claim is discussed in much detail in Brighouse's chapter on self-government. One interesting thing about this description is that it takes into account many indirect effects of the school (the environment, the composition, the ethos) that may intervene on the choices that are made possible to students, and thus provides a rich account of the way power and coercion are actually exercised.

According to Skinner's work on the genealogy of the concept of liberty (2016), power has traditionally been viewed as the absence of interference or constraint, and is thus usually seen as being exercised by an identifiable source onto the subject to prevent the subject from choosing freely. This source could be an external agent (such as a state, a parent, or a teacher) or the subject themselves (when they are acting solely out of passion or in an inauthentic way to fit social expectations, for example, or through false consciousness). Autonomy is thus often viewed as requiring an absence of interferences from outside agents or from oneself. Brighouse seems to follow this line of thought: if students are presented with authentic alternative choices or possibilities, if they have the capacity to exercise reflective reasoning, and if they are in an environment in which they can act on their judgements, they should have the freedom to choose their own conceptions of the good life – they will be able to exercise autonomy.

However, this general way of conceiving of self-government and autonomy still seems to rely on the idea that autonomy is a practice of freedom of choice, and that this is sufficient for self-governing. This is where the thought of Foucault might prove useful. The liberal accounts of autonomy, and their place in the conduct of a good or flourishing life, seem to be lacking a recognition that our conduct is inevitably conducted, that power is inevitably exercised, and that even self-government may be governed by an outside source of power. In other words, from a Foucauldian perspective, the practices and structures that scholars of students' wellbeing advocate are part of a governing apparatus and constitute a way of directing students' conduct. To show how this works, and how it affects the way we should understand the place of autonomy in any conception of "student wellbeing," I will now turn to Foucault's view on the concept of self-government, and the importance he gives to what he calls the care of the self.

As Foucault (2010) has carefully shown, modern power is characterized by a concern over coercing citizens as little as possible. The liberal state, and thus a liberal education, refuses to explicitly impose norms, principles, or ways of doing or thinking. However, according to him, the liberal state and schooling encourages these norms or behaviours differently, by making subjects/students *want them from the inside*, to reuse Brighouse's expression (Foucault, 2010). This power is not exercised through direct instruction or with the clear intention of closing students' minds by limiting their access to different views. On the contrary, it encourages free choice. However, it acts on the relationship that people develop with themselves, the way they "care for the self," to use Foucault's vocabulary. This is different from what Skinner calls "inauthenticity" (following social expectations) in the sense that the target of modern power is precisely the authentic will of the person. It is also slightly different from false consciousness or hegemony in the sense that it has nothing to do with social classes or any binary notion of ruler/ruled. Indeed, according to Foucault, modern political power is diffuse, it cannot be localized, it operates through the general discourses of the time, in common everyday speech, interactions, and activities. It operates through an ethics of truth (what is seen as possible and desirable by individual people) that is not the result of rational deliberations, of peer pressure about how one should live after considering different options, or any other linear source, but that is, rather, motivated by subtle incentives or disincentives in the context of concrete experiences that make people desire certain things in the most authentic way.

According to Foucault, the origin of this form of power is to be found in Christianity, in what Foucault calls pastoral power: practices of directing someone's conscience such as confession or prayer (Foucault, 2005; 2009). According to Foucault, and contrary to common belief, although pastoral power has been secularized, we have not completely gotten rid of it. A concrete example, lengthily analyzed by Dardot and Laval (2009), concerns the neoliberal incentive to perform and become competitive. The neoliberal state does not compel its citizens to become a certain way; it creates the right conditions, the proper stage, in which they will want to become competitive without even having the chance to rationally evaluate if they actually want to or not. For example, through the multiplication of tests and exams, of opportunities for one to stand out (prizes, bursaries), of specialists of achievement, students are progressively invited to position themselves in a world of performance and competition without really having much of a choice. Stepping back from this requires more than reflective reasoning: it requires an active form of resistance.

Hence, the target of modern power is precisely the relationship that people entertain with themselves in the multiple dimensions of their lives, in its most intimate and ordinary details, "the production of an interior, secret and hidden truth" (Foucault, in Lorenzini, 2015, p. 61) – all that affects the way they *choose* to govern themselves. Foucault coined the concept of "conduct" to examine the techniques and procedures developed by pastoral power in the Western world to govern human beings. Conduct refers to an activity of conduction as well as the way we conduct ourselves; to exercise power (to govern) is thus to try to conduct the conducts of others, to try to act on their possibilities of action, on the way they choose to govern themselves (ibid.). This is a three-dimensional process: conduct someone, being conducted, conduct oneself. The last dimension can be said to be autonomous only if one is able to accept or refuse, and for this to be a real possibility, one does not only need to be able to observe other possibilities and reflect on them, but one also must be able to critique and resist, and this means that one must engage in concrete practices or exercises of "counter-conduct."

If we accept the idea that modern political power is exercised through the way people are encouraged to relate to themselves, and thus through the exercises they practise of everyday life in which they develop this relationship, then the important analytical tool is not only the discourse, the external conditions, but mostly the daily, ordinary techniques that are being practised in schools, what Foucault calls "technologies of the self" (2005, 2009) and what Lorenzini (2015), inspired by Cavell, calls "techniques of the ordinary." The techniques are at the centre of all schooling practices: they take the form of reading, writing, or discussing, or of bodily exercises such as sitting, training, meditating, being attentive, memorizing, working the imagination, or remaining silent.[2] These techniques may be educative in many ways: they can help students to work on themselves, develop their minds, control their own thoughts and behaviours, or identify who they are and what their life projects might be, all forms of exercise that contribute to what Foucault calls the care of the self. However, according to Foucault, they can also induce a relationship to the self that is far from autonomous because they often rely on a form of obedience, whether in the form of a pastoral power or of a more liberal one, in which freedom of choice might be preserved on the surface but in which the choice is actually constrained to consenting to the rule of the majority or the market (ibid., p.72).

The reason for this detour through Foucault's theory is to insist on the fact that for some form of self-government (or autonomy) to be a real possibility in real existences (and not just an abstract, juridical

[2] Inspired by Foucault, and Hadot and Cavell, Lorenzini (2015) identifies five sets of techniques that contribute to this ethical process of constitution of the self: attention techniques (concentration on the self, delimitation of the present, attention to the particular), thought techniques (meditation, self-examination, discipline of representations, direction of conscience, gaze and imagination exercises), speech techniques (writing, reading, listening, dialogue, conversation, parrhêsia), corporeal techniques (body training, use of pleasures, cynic despoliation), and refusal techniques (civil disobedience and the courage of eccentricity).

one), one needs to engage in counter-conducts and to experience other ways of conducting oneself. This requires a critical attitude, which is not to be understood simply as the skill of critical thinking, that is, the skill of putting something into question or denouncing it. It refers to an ethos, an ethics (of truth); a way of being, caring, thinking; a refusal to being conducted in such a way, to such an extent; and the actual practice of something different (Foucault, 1997). For Foucault, as for other philosophers such as Hadot and Cavell (Lorenzini, 2015), this opens a new space in the political sphere, the sphere of ethics, understood not as a set of normative principles but as a practical way of life and of caring for oneself.

To come back to the notion of wellbeing as an aim of schooling, we can recall that in educational research, there is a general tendency to define wellbeing and its conditions of realization, and to reflect on how to pursue it through various practices and procedures. The critical literature on this topic is, as we have seen, already well developed. One problem that seems to run across it, as I have tried to show, is the tendency towards normalization: defining a notion of wellbeing to be pursued can lead to various forms of psychologization, reductions, and exclusions. Against this critical literature, one could argue that the type of normalization that the aim of wellbeing induces is not problematic because it does not impede people's capacity to decide how they ought to live. Through the activities that schools provide to foster wellbeing, one could argue that what is offered are "resources" for flourishing and not the promotion of a way of life. In this section, I introduced Foucault's notion of self-government and technologies of the self to show that the techniques and exercises that are being practised daily in schools cannot be dissociated from the practical ethics of everyday life that they promote and suggested that they could inadvertently constitute tools of normalization instead of leading to autonomy. What now remains to be explored is whether or not these exercises allow for some degree of autonomy in the way they lead people to conduct themselves, to self-govern, in the details of their daily ordinary lives.

## Ordinary Techniques of Care for the Self: Adaptation Versus Adjustment

In order to reflect on the degree of autonomy allowed by certain school exercises, more specifically exercises that have to do with wellbeing and self-government, I now briefly examine two categories of practices (or technologies of the self): techniques of self-regulation and techniques of self-expression. The purpose of this last section is to show that these techniques do not automatically lead to autonomy or flourishing, and that, as a matter of fact, they generally do not because of their cooptation by a system overly focused on achievement competition. However, I also claim here that they could perhaps potentially be liberatory if they were used as tools of care for the self (*epimeleia heautou*), although this seems unlikely in our present time (Foucault, 2005). As suggested, to care for the self is to live well, or ethically, in Foucault's view: it is to ask the question of how one ought to live deliberately, not simply following implicit rules or conventions, but affirming the self through concrete exercises of transformation – technologies of the self that allow one to act on their body and soul, their thoughts, conducts, and ways of being (ibid.).

Techniques of self-regulation are taught to help students to appease themselves, reduce their stress, concentrate, be attentive to the situation, and most importantly, control their emotions, behaviours, and thoughts (Shanker, 2013). They come in different forms – meditation, relaxation, cardiac coherency, breathing, drawing, time management, problem-resolution techniques, physical exercises such as yoga or stretching – and their main purpose is to create a classroom climate that is conducive to learning. As such, autoregulation techniques are directly associated with the conception of wellbeing presented in the first section, with notions of social and emotional skills as well as autonomy and meaningful learning.

These techniques can be conducted by people in a variety of ways and that is precisely where the ethical dimension stated above comes into play. The type of relationship that someone develops with themselves will define the ethical substance of their conduct: is it a relation of obedience, of guidance, of inspiration, of critique, of resistance? The techniques in themselves have little meaning outside the

relationship the person develops with them, and this seems like an important blind spot of our educational systems. Educators initiate students daily into a set of techniques with very little regard for the way students relate to them. However, this relationship has to do with the type of subjectivity they are developing through them. Is it one in which the students are asked to blindly apply the techniques to achieve what the system expects of them? Or is it one in which they learn how to care for the self, how to give shape to their own lives? Do the exercises that are practised encourage an attitude of critique regarding what is expected, an attitude of openness to self-transformation or towards self-affirmation?

As mentioned, self-regulation skills are usually taught in schools to help students develop emotional and cognitive self-control (Shanker, 2013). However, they can easily be coopted to the benefit of other forces, especially economic ones (Schwimmer, 2021; Danis & Schwimmer, 2022). Indeed, self-regulation techniques are often used in the context of schooling as tools to help reduce the anxiety and stress caused by the pressure imposed on students to achieve in different domains. In such contexts, self-regulation is instrumental: it is primarily a tool that schools use for the purpose of achievement, a tool that students are invited to use to adapt to a system obsessed with performance.[3] In this context, the relationship that one develops with oneself is somehow predetermined by a field of finalized actions oriented towards ends that have been extrinsically defined and that do not necessarily help the students to enter a relationship of care for the self. On the contrary, some even argue that techniques of self-regulation can contribute to developing an alienated relationship with the self because they implicitly teach people to accept the status quo and to transform themselves in order to fit, adapt, and cope with the educational (or more widely the political and economic) system as it is, even if it is debilitating for them (see, for example, Dardot & Laval, 2009; Møllgaard, 2008; Critchley, 2008). The example of mindfulness is illuminating here. Empirical research conducted with teachers who use self-regulation techniques in their classrooms has shown that they mostly do so from an adaptative perspective to create a calm classroom climate in preparation for learning (Danis & Schwimmer, 2022; Garcia, Fraysse, & Bataille, 2021). The practice of mindfulness is rarely conducted as a genuine exercise of care for the self, but more often as a tool for something else. If students are repeatedly introduced to the technique of mindfulness as a preparation for something that has been determined by the teacher, there is little chance that they will develop a relationship of ownership with it. In other words, the context in which one is introduced to a daily routine will most certainly inform the meaning of that practice. Perhaps, to follow Foucault's perspective, to be able to experience it in a way that is not instrumental or subjected to values of achievement or competition, and that is potentially liberatory would require that the practice be recontextualized and reframed as a counter-conduct. Mindfulness would have to be experienced as a genuine alternative detached from any concerns for achievement or obedience, and even as a way to practise resistance, which, in our current context, seems fairly unrealistic.

Besides self-regulation techniques, wellbeing is often pursued through techniques of self-expression. These techniques can also take various forms such as reflective practices (reflective writing, reflective drawing), dialogue with another (whether it is the teacher, an educational psychologist, or another student), and group discussion. They are generally introduced to students to help them identify their feelings and thoughts, and to communicate them properly and thus resolve conflicts (inner conflicts or conflicts with others) that they may be experiencing (Danis & Schwimmer, 2022). Popular among educators are techniques such as the worry box, the "feeling" tree, or circle time, in which students are invited to name and share their worries and their feelings. Being able to put words on what you are experiencing is an important way to grow as a person. However, as is the case for self-regulation techniques, these exercises can also be predetermined from the outside in a way that may prove restrictive. As Ecclestone and Hayes (2008) have argued, when such exercises are programmed in such a way that vocabularies are imposed on students, they can paradoxically contribute to imposing a certain orthodoxy of feeling instead of letting students explore more freely ways of expressing themselves.

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[3] Liz Jackson (2019) has also analyzed this danger carefully in her provocative paper entitled "Must Children Sit Still?: The Dark Biopolitics of Mindfulness and Yoga in Education."

Here again, techniques of self-expression can hence be assimilated by students in a variety of ways: they can either incite students to adapt to pre-defined models of speech, or become productive tools of adjustment. Adjustment, contrary to adaptation, reflects a complex relationship to the existing world in which a person works on self-understanding, affirmation, and transformation, through attention, listening, and conversation. The techniques, instead of contributing to normalization processes, can thus also help students to individualize as subjects and become self-reliant. But to be as such, self-regulation and self-expression need to be reframed as open-ended and free from any predetermined goal. Again, this requires a particular sensitivity to the way these techniques are introduced to students, the context and the language that is used. If a mindfulness technique is systematically introduced before exams or explicitly as an instrument to help students calm down before a lesson, then its instrumental function will implicitly be transmitted, and students will probably be prone to develop an instrumental relationship with it. In a similar way, if students are systemically invited to name and discuss their emotional life using a set of predetermined concepts (such as joy, anger, or sadness), they might not be inclined to explore other distinctions or ways of expressing it that would be a better "fit" *for them*, to use Cavell's expression (2015), with their own personal experience.

## Conclusion

Theories centred on wellbeing, happiness, or human flourishing as a goal of schooling cannot do without establishing a certain norm of flourishing. Although they might not necessarily always provide a clear list of the traits and behaviours that must be developed to flourish, or exactly what type of model of "happiness" needs to be reached, these theories usually provide a clear picture of what conditions and/or resources are required to be able to lead a flourishing life. These resources are considered to leave a person free to choose his or her conception of the good life because they are presented as distinct from the person, as tools that may or may not be used. What I have tried to show in this paper is that these resources cannot be detached and exteriorized so easily from those who use or enact them because they are practices – exercises that are intimately related to the way people conduct and relate to themselves. They are the fabric that constitutes the subjectivities in their most authentic forms.

What I have tried to show is that these exercises can only allow for some degree of autonomy in the way they lead people to conduct themselves, to self-govern in their daily ordinary lives, if they can be experienced in a way that has not been predetermined. This requires that teachers and other educationists refrain from imposing a predefined notion of what is wellbeing or flourishing for the students. It requires a particular attention to the contexts and conditions in which they are introduced, and which give them their meaning and their force. Flourishing is not something that should be characterized in advance; it is something students should be invited to define for themselves through a process of progressive adjustment (as opposed to simple adaptation) to a real-life perspective that is there, but that can also be changed. This requires that students have a chance not only to encounter a variety of ways of living and reflect on them, but to engage in everyday school exercises, conducts, and conversations in a way that leaves them some space to experience them in an undetermined way.

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