CHAPTER 3

WHAT KIND OF THEORY SHOULD THEORY ON EDUCATION FOR HUMAN FLOURISHING BE?

Abstract
In this article we defend the claim that theory on education for flourishing should also include nonideal theory. We observe that recent theory on education for flourishing takes the ideal of flourishing as a starting point and central point of the theory, and should be seen as ideal theory. While this serves a purpose, the practical value of ideal theory is limited. In order to have a greater bearing on and relevance for educational practice, nonideal theorising should be encouraged.

Keywords
Ideal theory, Nonideal theory, Education, Human flourishing, Ideals, Idealisations

Chapter 3

3.1 Introduction

In philosophy of education, human flourishing has been defended as an ideal or overarching aim of education, by some even as the ideal aim of education. These authors argue that education, and school curricula, should pay more attention to striving for a flourishing life, and the sort of goods that are claimed to be constitutive of or to contribute to a flourishing life. Some claim that the traditional curriculum should incorporate ways of equipping children to lead flourishing lives, while others propose to change the traditional curriculum to better fulfil the ideal aim of equipping children to lead flourishing lives.

Wolbert, De Ruyter and Schinkel have argued that every conception of flourishing meets the following five criteria: (1) human flourishing is regarded as intrinsically worthwhile; (2) flourishing is described in some way as the actualisation of human potential; (2a) flourishing is about a whole life; (2b) it is a dynamic state; and (2c) flourishing presupposes that there are objective goods. According to Wolbert et al. such conceptual clarification contributes to the discussion if and how flourishing should be argued for as an ideal aim of education and how such an ideal can be implemented in educational policy and practices. But we think there is another pressing matter that needs to be addressed.

Apart from clarification of the concept of flourishing, we think it is important to ask what kind of theory educational theory on flourishing usually/generally is, and what kind of theory it should be. While parents, teachers and those who are being educated inevitably will encounter the complexity of “real life”, and all the good and/or bad luck that comes with it, in other words live in a real and an actual world, educational theory can, in principle, avoid the limitations of reality altogether, or mend/bend reality in a way that the theorist deems appropriate. For this reason it has to be well considered by theorists in what way educational theory theorises about, and relates itself to the nonideal. It must be made clear in advance that we are not simply addressing the inevitable gap between theory and practice in this paper, but that we are addressing issues within or about theory, i.e. we are discussing in what way educational theories can be construed, and in what way they should be.

The article therefore starts with definitions of ideal theory, nonideal theory and idealisations taken from literature on theories of justice. Secondly we analyse and evaluate examples of recent

---

2 E.g. Brighouse 2008.
3 E.g. Reiss and White 2013.
4 Wolbert, De Ruyter and Schinkel 2015.
5 Throughout this paper, ‘real’ and ‘realistic’ refer to a world or a practice that can exist in reality, whereas with ‘actual’ a particular reality in a certain time and place is meant, e.g. current schools in The Netherlands.
educational theory on flourishing in light of these definitions to see whether and to what extent they are cases of ideal theory. We end by sketching the outlines of a nonideal theory on education for flourishing.

3.2 **Ideal Theory, Nonideal Theory and Idealisations**

Ideal theory starts with, and centralises, the (normative) ideal situation. John Rawls’ theory of justice can be seen as a paradigmatic example of ideal theory.\(^6\) He argued that only when one has an idea of the perfectly just society, one can begin to theorise how the world should be changed into it.\(^7\) In education, this would for example mean that one has to start with theorising what the perfect classroom would look like, for instance a classroom filled with healthy, awake and motivated children, a dedicated teacher and challenging materials. With such a picture theorists as well as teachers can begin to reflect on how to get there, i.e. what it requires of teachers, the school and the pupils. Amartya Sen on the other hand, opposed Rawls’ claim by arguing that the actual world should have primacy when constructing a theory of justice.\(^8\) There is so much injustice in our actual world, he argues, that there is less practical value (or none at all) in theorising perfection, but all the more in theorising how we can bring about changes towards more justice in the actual world. In the classroom example this would imply beginning with the daily practice in which many teachers are faced with children who haven’t had breakfast, whose personal or family circumstances overshadow their interest in learning, and/or where the teachers face a (too) heavy teaching and administration load. How, and to what extent, should teachers deal with this?\(^9\) So, in nonideal theory the actual is theoretically central.\(^10\)

This is a rough, but useful distinction.\(^11\) We can further distinguish two forms of ideal theory, utopian idealism, which theorises the perfectly just society irrespective of the possible constraints of the actual world,\(^12\) and realistic idealism, which is concerned with what is ideal given the possible constraints of this world.\(^13\)

---

\(^6\) Rawls 1999.
\(^7\) Ideal theory is not necessarily a comprehensive, fully complete theory, it can also be partial ideal theory, limiting itself for example to describing one domain instead of all domains of justice; see Robeyns 2008, p. 344.
\(^8\) Sen 2006.
\(^9\) Cf. Kristjánsson 2017, p. 94.
\(^11\) The distinction is not undisputed. For example Hamlin and Stemplowska argue that there rather is a multidimensional continuum of (normative) views. Bearing this in mind, we think that the dichotomy is nonetheless useful in this article, see Hamlin and Stemplowska 2012.
\(^12\) E.g. Estlund 2008.
\(^13\) See Schmidtz 2016, p. 2.
Chapter 3

Non-ideal theory, then, is rather primarily concerned with the (political) questions that are actually acute in the world as it is.14 Political philosopher Ingrid Robeyns argues that ‘in cases in which we are not in a fully just society, we need [nonideal] theory to guide us for two important tasks: first to be able to make comparisons between different social states and evaluate which one is more just than the other; and, second, to guide our actions in order to move closer towards the ideals of society’.15 Non-ideal theory is sometimes called ‘transition theory’ which refers to the transition from the actual towards the ideal.

Idealisations

Political philosopher Charles Mills argues that ideal theory relies on idealisations ‘to the exclusion, or at least marginalization, of the actual’.16 Idealisations are assumptions on the basis of which a theory construes a reality as simpler or better than it actually is.17 Examples are models of the (financial) market in economic theory, but also the conception of the person as a consumer, a rational agent, or an independent agent, which are used in political and economic theory, but also in educational theory. Yet, a real person is never just a consumer, or always rational, and in this sense the assumption differs from reality.

This is not necessarily problematic, as idealisations can be useful in their function of abstraction, because abstractions are likely to have a wide scope.18 Moreover, they can function as simplification, because they reduce the complexity of the real world: a theory that makes use of simplifications makes the messiness of reality more manageable.19 Furthermore, idealised pictures of reality can function as a point on the horizon one looks towards for direction.20

Arguments Against Idealisations and Ideal Theory

However, there are also arguments against (a reliance on) idealisations. First, the translation from ideal to the non-ideal world is not straightforward, meaning that it is not – by itself – clear from idealisations how they ought to be dealt with on a non-ideal level.21 Ideal theory, which centralises the ideal instead of the actual is inclined to limit itself to describing the ideal situation, sometimes hinting in the direction of what needs to change in order to move closer to the ideal, but is not

---

14 See Frazer 2016, p. 179.
20 Ibid., p. 344.
21 Ibid., p. 357.
committed to reasoning how one should bring about such change – and whether it is possible, and to what extent, in the actual world.

Second, Robeyns argues that there are so-called ‘bad idealisations’ which ignore certain aspects of ‘the human condition’ which are so central to humanity that it is not justified to leave them out. She gives the example of a conception of the person as independent agent. Actual persons are always dependent upon others for care, forming relationships, etc., and this is such a defining aspect of someone’s life that one cannot construe a legitimate theory without taking human interdependency into account. Nonideal theory explicitly aims to not go above and beyond what actual human beings in this world (i.e. the actual world) are capable of, and should therefore be less susceptible to bad idealisations than ideal theory.

Mills goes even further in arguing that all ideal theory in fact ‘guarantees’ that the ideal situation will never be reached. He thinks that if theory abstracts away from actual injustices in the actual world, we will drift further away from making the world a better place. Mills distinguishes six types of (bad) idealisations which ideal theory as an approach usually assumes: an idealised ontology, which includes the example of Robeyns of the conception of the person as an independent agent; idealised capacities; silence on oppression, ideal social institutions, which refers to idealised versions of for example the family, the legal system, etc.; an idealised cognitive sphere, which refers to a kind of social transparency; and finally strict compliance, which basically is the assumption that every inhabitant of the perfect society will participate and cooperate to uphold this society.

### 3.3 Recent Theory on Education for Flourishing

In a (critical) review of recent educational theory on flourishing as an aim of education, Kristján Kristjánsson identifies John White, Harry Brighouse and Doret de Ruyter as prominent advocates of flourishing as an overarching aim of education. According to Kristjánsson, the current flourishing paradigm takes a ‘strength-based approach’, meaning that it focuses on further developing those character strengths that are intrinsically related to/constitutive of flourishing. We will look at the work of these prominent advocates, including Kristjánsson himself, to see what kind of theorising they engage in.

---

22 Ibid., p. 358.
24 Ibid., pp. 168-169.
25 Kristjánsson 2017, p. 87.
26 Ibid., p. 2.
Chapter 3

We can distinguish between theorising about education for flourishing, i.e. what teachers and parents should do (to give children the best chance of a flourishing life), and theorising about flourishing as an aim of education. It is plausible that these are related in the sense that if the theory on the aim of education is ideal theory, the theory on education is likely to be ideal theory as well. This is not necessarily the case, but we have assumed it to be related in this way for the abovementioned theories. In line with these theories, we will focus on theory on education for flourishing, unless specified otherwise.

The ideal of human flourishing

Human flourishing is presented in educational theory as an ideal aim, although this is not made explicit in all texts of the abovementioned scholars. We can speak of an ideal situation, or of an ideal quality when it refers to an excellent or perfect situation or quality, which is highly valued, and which people aspire to achieve.27 Of the abovementioned scholars only De Ruyter writes explicitly that she defends an ideal, and that she is describing an idealised education.28 Kristjánsson also uses the word ideal, although he does not explain what he means by it. He also speaks of an ‘overarching aim’ or ‘central purpose’, which is similar to the wording of White and Brighouse. White writes about well-being as a ‘rationale’, and a ‘vision of education’ that is behind educational aims.29

A distinction can be made between realisable and unrealisable ideals,30 or common ideals and ultimate ideals.31 Common ideals refer to excellence, whereas ultimate ideals are perfections. Human flourishing can be interpreted on a continuum of realisability; from a common ideal, which implies that children are to be equipped to become the ‘best a person can imagine achieving in his or her lifetime’ and which is thus an achievable ideal for average human beings, to the ultimate ideal of perfect flourishing, which implies that it might be worth striving for, but for average human beings will never be (fully) achievable.32 In the second sense it functions as a regulative ideal; it ‘set[s] a direction for a practice and prevent[s] us from settling for surrogates’.33 We found it often unclear whether the theories presented by the prominent advocates for human flourishing describe an ultimate or a common ideal – or, where on the spectrum of realisability the ideal was supposed to lie. It is clear however that the ideal of flourishing has an important role in the educational

28 E.g. De Ruyter 2012.
30 Rescher 1987.
31 De Ruyter 2007, p. 25.
32 Idem.
theories of White, Brighouse, Kristjánssson and De Ruyter, but this alone does not necessarily mean that the theories are ideal theory.\footnote{See Mills 2005.}

**Functions of theory on education for flourishing**

Function and type of theory are interrelated; a theory that is intended to be action-guiding is more likely to be an instance of nonideal theory, for instance. Therefore it is useful to see what function or purpose the advocates of educational theory on flourishing ascribe to their theory. According to White the primary purpose of philosophy of education is clarification, albeit that the discussions in his book are ‘always harnessed to educational ends’.\footnote{White 2011, p. 2.} The subtitle of that book is ‘a guide to making children’s lives more fulfilling’, which reveals that besides clarification it aspires to ‘guide’ schools as well. De Ruyter, too, writes in a footnote about the possibility of translating her proposal to policy.\footnote{De Ruyter 2012.} In a sense we will explain further on, Brighouse’s orientation is quite practical, offering suggestions as to what the curriculum on a very practical level should look like to better equip children to live flourishing lives.\footnote{Brighouse 2008, pp. 64-70.} This also suggests a stronger role for his philosophy than inspiration alone, although Brighouse’s text is written in a style too general to count as direct action guiding for any particular school. All in all, we would say that most educational theory on flourishing aims to offer ‘indirect’ guidance, in the sense that it does not offer direct (policy) advice to schools and parents, but it does hope to guide, for example, the development of educational policy, or empirical research that leads to practical implementations, with their clarifications of concepts and justifications of claims and possible practices. As such, it aspires to fulfil more than an inspirational role, but it is not directly ‘action-guiding’ in the sense in which Robeyns conceives of the purpose of nonideal theory.\footnote{Robeyns 2008, p. 346.}

**Idealisations in theory on education for flourishing**

A common denominator in the work of the abovementioned scholars is that they give descriptions of the things human beings need in order to be able to flourish. In his 2011 book *Exploring well-being in schools: a guide to making children’s lives more fulfilling*, White describes ‘basic needs’ such as housing, basic income and good health which to him are instrumental goods that are necessary assumptions for being able to lead a flourishing life. Likewise, Kristjánssson distinguishes two ‘preconditions’ to flourishing: external necessities and a sense of meaning and purpose.\footnote{Kristjánssson 2017, p. 91.} However,
in her 2004 article *Pottering in the garden? On human flourishing and education* De Ruyter describes similar objective goods, such as for example safety, good health and having intimate social relationships, which a person has to interpret for herself, to be able to give meaning to them (subjective goods). De Ruyter makes clear that these goods should not be interpreted instrumentally in the sense that they are a means to the end of flourishing. The satisfaction of these goods constitutes flourishing.\(^{40}\) Brighouse refers to the same type of things as ‘central factors influencing our levels of happiness’.\(^{41}\)

The same goods are thus categorized differently. Good health for example is sometimes a basic, instrumental need, sometimes an intrinsic good; sometimes a precondition and sometimes part of flourishing. According to Kristjánsson, it is also not always clear in Aristotle’s own text on *eudaimonia* which goods are to be seen as constituents of flourishing or rather as preconditions; the categories rather seem to overlap.\(^{42}\) The goods described above have in common that they are mostly described in a minimal way, or a certain threshold manner; good enough health for example, or safety (being safe enough to be able to flourish), or having intimate relationships (not specifying how much, how long, how deep).

Such goods are what we might call the building blocks of a theory of flourishing. Mills argues that ideal theory has to rely on idealisations (to the extent of marginalizing or excluding the actual) to construe its theory.\(^{43}\) He means with this that ideal theories need external idealising assumptions to be able to make the theory ‘work’. An example is the assumption of full compliance in Rawls’ theory of justice. In so far as the building blocks that we have discussed above (e.g. good health) are constituents of flourishing, they are not external idealising assumptions needed to construct a theory of flourishing, for they are part of the ideal of a flourishing life. However, when it is argued that a building block is an instrumental good, these goods can function as idealising assumptions which the (ideal) theory on education relies upon. For example, White, and Reiss and White give a description of what a school should do in order to equip children to live flourishing lives, i.e. propose a theory on education for flourishing.\(^ {44}\) For the school to be able to commence this task, it ‘needs’ a certain type of child to come to school in the morning, i.e. the theory needs to assume conditions of this child, for example ‘a certain level of health’, ‘respect’ and ‘freedom from attack, arbitrary arrest and other impositions’.\(^ {45}\) In other words, the theory relies on certain idealisations (that the child is healthy, free from attack, etc.) to be able to construe its theory on education for flourishing (i.e. how the school should equip (those) children).

\(^{40}\) De Ruyter 2004, p. 382.
\(^{41}\) Brighouse 2008, p. 60.
\(^{42}\) Kristjánsson 2017, p. 91.
\(^{43}\) Mills 2005, p. 168.
\(^{44}\) See White 2011 and Reiss and White 2013.
\(^{45}\) Reiss and White 2013, p. 7-8.
The actual situation might be different, of course. Actual children have disabilities, or come from violent homes or neighbourhoods. This suggests that these particular examples are a form of ideal theory, because the theory centrally relies on idealising assumptions which depict “the child” as better situated than children in reality are, or can be expected to be. We are not convinced that the other scholars discussed here rely on idealisations in the same manner, they seem to only write about these conditions (health, relationships, etc.) as constituents of flourishing, that is, as part of the ideal they are describing.

The ideal as central

Another important aspect that overlaps is that the theories start with, and give central weight to, the ideal situation. In White’s 2011 book every chapter comprises a (more) theoretical part and a second part that is called ‘issues for education’, where he discusses the implications of his theory for educational practice. The ideal principles developed in the theory are his starting point. In her 2007 article on ideals and flourishing, De Ruyter does a similar thing. Starting from a general (minimal) principle, namely that children need ideals to flourish, she argues that it is the responsibility of teachers to offer those, because the state cannot be sure that, in practice, parents will do so and/or whether parents will offer the ‘right’ ideals.

At first Brighouse seems to take a different course. His introductory chapter starts with the recent strong expectations laid upon schools to ‘make up for the failures of other social institutions’. This implies that the actual situation is taken as a central or starting point. However, this is not the case if one looks at the structure of the rest of the book. As Brighouse explains in the introduction, in part one he ‘elaborate[s] for a set of principles that schools, policymakers, and educators should adopt,’ and in the second part the book ‘takes up three concrete policy controversies in the light of the[se] principle[s].

In general (and this does no justice to the nuances and differences of the diverse books and articles) the authors argue from a set of ideal-theoretical conditions towards what this might imply for either a realistic or an actual educational practice.

---

46 White (2011) and Reiss and White (2013) do not deny that the actual situation is often suboptimal, which we discuss in the next section. However, that they do so does not alter the fact that the optimal conditions are necessary as idealising assumptions in construing the theory.
47 De Ruyter 2007, p. 34.
48 Brighouse 2006.
49 Ibid., p. 1.
50 Ibid., p. 2.
51 Ibid., p. 5.
Chapter 3

Practice(s)

The above discussion does not mean to imply that reality or the actual situation of education receives no attention in the theories. It is acknowledged by all authors in some form or another that the world is not perfect. White, for example, outlines in the 2011 book ‘how the wider society would need to change to bring this [a life of well-being] more within everybody’s reach’.\textsuperscript{52} Also, attention is paid to the limitations of the particular agent, as De Ruyter argues that ‘flourishing is a balancing act, in which aspirations are combined with realism, (.) are weighed against each other and (.) are balanced with other values and responsibilities’.\textsuperscript{53}

Also, there is attention for the practical. For example, Brighouse elaborates on ‘what the education system should do (.) in pursuit of its obligation to prepare children to live flourishing lives’.\textsuperscript{54} Brighouse takes the reader step-by-step through the three spheres of the school – the formal, the informal and the hidden curriculum, and elaborates in great detail how things ought to be done differently. Reiss and White take a similar practical approach by asking what the implications for the curriculum of a school are if we take well-being seriously as an overarching aim of education.\textsuperscript{55} They argue that usually, in practice, the situation is the other way around, schools accept the current traditionally important subjects (reading, math, biology etc.) and build up a curriculum from this given (a subject-led curriculum). According to Reiss and White aims-based education, i.e. beginning with well-being as the overarching aim of education, leads to different choices, for example to different – new – subjects.

These examples indicate that for none of the discussed scholars the nonideal world, i.e. educational practice, is irrelevant, therefore we can conclude that their theorising is not ideal theory in the form of (or analogous to) utopian idealism.\textsuperscript{56} However, even though some of these examples are clearly practical, and describe real educational practices,\textsuperscript{57} we have not seen examples of what Robeyns calls ‘transition theory’ which attempts to theorise the transition from the actual towards the ideal.\textsuperscript{58} The above discussed texts perhaps do not seem to be ideal theory, because they refer to a (nonideal) reality or actual practice, but they still argue from the ideal to the actual, and sometimes on the basis of idealisations. What is important to make clear here is that although real practices are being described, these are not central to the theory. Nonideal theory, to our minds, requires a full integration of the actual into the theory; and transition theory even requires theorising how the actual needs to change in order to move more in the direction of the ideal.

\textsuperscript{52} White 2011, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{53} De Ruyter 2012, p. 28.
\textsuperscript{54} Brighouse 2008, pp. 64-70.
\textsuperscript{55} Reiss and White 2013.
\textsuperscript{56} See Schmidt 2016.
\textsuperscript{57} Such as Brighouse 2008, and Reiss and White 2013.
\textsuperscript{58} Robeyns 2008, p. 346.
Is theory on education for flourishing ideal theory?

To conclude, we have seen that none of the discussed theories start from actual problems, in other words, from the nonideal world. On the contrary, in general the authors argue from a set of ideal theoretical conditions towards what this might imply for either a realistic or an actual educational practice. This Rawlsian ‘route’ that starts with and centralises the ideal situation, is our first and most important argument for the claim that current theory on education for flourishing should be considered a form of ideal theory. Second, we have seen that the discussed theories are not directly ‘action-guiding’ to the extent that nonideal theories would be. Third, all of the above examples make use of idealisations, and in some cases the theories have to rely upon external idealising assumptions, which is characteristic of ideal theory. Fourth, although real practices are being described, these are not central to the theory. In other words, the nonideal, actual world in some sense remains an ‘add-on’. We think therefore that the theories on education for flourishing as proposed by White, Brighouse, De Ruyter and Kristjánsson (even though he criticises current theories for neglecting what he calls ‘adverse external circumstances’) should be seen as forms of ideal theory analogous to realistic idealism.

3.4 Problems with Ideal Theory on Education for Flourishing

The (minimal) conditions deemed necessary for a flourishing life are for a large part what Kristjánsson calls ‘external necessities’; they lie outside an agent’s control. White acknowledges this in saying that one of the basic needs of a flourishing life is good luck. It is of course possible to idealise these external necessities (e.g. good health, loving relationships, beauty, etc.), but in doing so, theorists have to ignore a whole lot of real and actual differences in ‘luck’ in education, and they do not answer in their theory on flourishing how teachers/parents should handle this. According to Kristjánsson

59 In the case of White 2011, and Reiss and White 2013.
60 See Mills 2005.
61 See Kristjánsson 2017, p. 94. Most theories on education for flourishing hark back to Aristotelian eudaimonia in one way or another, i.e. can be called Aristotelian or quasi-Aristotelian. Kristjánsson’s conception of flourishing is explicitly Aristotelian. We thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing to our attention that in Aristotelian theory it is unclear whether his theorising is ideal theorising or not, because Aristotle does emphasise that the world for most people is not ideal, whilst describing the virtues (needed for eudaimonia) mostly in its most complete (i.e. ideal) way, as Kristjánsson does in the same manner in his 2016 article. It might therefore be partly due to Aristotle’s heritage that it is not clear in current theories on flourishing that they are in fact forms of ideal theory. Fully addressing the connection between Aristotelian theory and current theories would however require another article.
63 White 2011.
Chapter 3

dthis sticking point is given surprisingly little attention by current flourishing theorists. Even White (…) concedes quite readily that a number of the external necessities are “beyond the school’s control”. While that may seem incontestable, it leaves open the question of whether teachers should just bow down, poker faced, to the force of adverse external circumstances impacting on student learning, or whether they should take up arms on students’ behalf.64

We think that one of the reasons that little attention is paid to this ‘sticking point’ is that the structure of ideal theory gives little reason/leaves little room to address Kristjánsson’s question. By building an educational theory upon minimal yet ideal conditions, the theory either has to continue arguing in the following form: ‘if the minimal criteria (e.g. White’s basic needs) are met, then children can be equipped for flourishing in such and such a way’ or the theory has to provide separate suggestions as to how the world first has to change in order to make these equally lucky or unlucky children more equal.65

As we have discussed above, the translation from the ideal to the nonideal level is not straightforward; we also want to know ‘how to deal with the idealisations when moving to the nonideal level’.66 Overlooking the type of questions Kristjánsson mentions, questions which address how we should go about moving from ideals to the nonideal level, is to our mind one reason to object against the exclusive use of ideal theory in educational theory on flourishing. Nonideal educational theory on flourishing, on the other hand, would be more inclined to raise the question of how teachers should respond to ‘the force of adverse external circumstances’, because it takes the actual unequal situation of the student in Kristjánsson’s example as a central and starting point. In the next part we will sketch the outlines of theory on education for flourishing that takes the actual as its starting point.

Kristjánsson’s point is also interesting regarding a related, but different objection to ideal theory. The specific things that White deems ‘beyond the school’s control’, such as ‘clean air, power, housing, a police force, banks, government’, are idealisations which are needed to construe the theory that is being presented in White, as we have argued for above.67 These things might indeed not be in the hands of the teacher but they do determine how a particular child from a particular environment arrives at school, and as such are central to the ‘human condition’. We

65 E.g. White 2011, chapter 15.
67 White 2011, p. 30.
therefore argue that the assumption of these things (clean air, power, etc.) as building blocks of the theory is an example of ‘bad idealisations’, which limits the value of ideal theory.68

Ruth Cigman finds recent theory on flourishing as an aim of education ‘unpopulated’, by which she means that ‘real’ people are being neglected.69 People are being formalized (‘the agent’), which is another example of a ‘bad idealisation’, namely of the conception of a person.70 For instance White gives the example of the life of a fictional girl ‘Willow’ who is ‘enveloped in close, loving relationships’ and whose parents ‘lay further foundations for her well-being’.71 Willow is not real, she doesn’t really exist, and more importantly she could not be real, for her upbringing is too flawless, too perfect to be perceived of as even possibly real. She is what Cigman calls a ‘snapshot’. Cigman’s question here is not whether such a blueprint of a flourishing life can be given, clearly it can, but she asks what purpose it has. If White’s 2011 book is a ‘guide to making children’s lives more fulfilling’, what is the purpose of an idealised story of an upbringing? It can be argued that it is meant as the presentation of an image that guides the reader by showing what it is that educators ought to aspire to, it functions as a regulative ideal.72 However, it might also be that such formalization of the agents (here: the parents) might actually reduce the value of the ideal theory, because it takes the theory too far away from the actual human condition and from what human beings are actually like.

3.5 Outlines of a Nonideal Theory on Education for Flourishing

In view of the problems inherent in ideal theory, it is worth asking whether it is desirable to also theorise education for flourishing in a nonideal way. What would characterise such a nonideal theory, and what would be the merits of nonideal theorising? In our opinion there are two options.

The first is to reflect upon education in light of the overarching aim of flourishing and conclude that too many parents, schools and children are so far removed from the ideal that describing an ideal blueprint has little meaning. Therefore we should, for example by following Sen’s suggestion, focus on the instrumental needs of children in particular contexts, and theorise how these can be met in real life. In this sense, the theory focuses on moving away from the nonideal situation, as opposed to starting from the ideal blueprint. Ideal theory on education for flourishing, the argument might run, assumes healthy, motivated, (etc.) children. A pressing

69 Cigman 2018.
70 See Robeyns 2008, p. 358, and see also Mills’ explanation of an idealised ontology, 2005.
71 White 2011, p. 124.
concern in the actual practice of education is however that children in fact do not all have access to the same (levels) of these basic goods. According to this first option we should prioritise theorising how the basic, instrumental needs of children are to be reached. This would avoid a reliance on bad idealisations of the type discussed above.

However, the concept of human flourishing is regarded as a final aim – that which everything in life aims at, and theory on education for flourishing is likely to describe what the final, i.e. most complete and thus perfect state of flourishing looks like and consequently of how to educate for flourishing in a most complete way. Thus, a second, though not mutually exclusive, option is to develop a theory on education for human flourishing in which the nonideal is the starting point and as such integrated in the conceptualisation of (how to reach) the final, ideal situation. This will satisfy our need to know how to deal with idealisations when moving to the nonideal level.

We can take ‘autonomy’, or the ‘right to self-government’, as an important ideal educational aim and part of a flourishing life to exemplify how this can be done.\(^\text{73}\) Theorising about autonomy as (part of) an aim of education in ideal-theoretical form would imply starting with an exploration of what perfect autonomy looks like. An ideal theory on education for flourishing would then theorise how parents and/or schools could best (ideally) educate children in order that they be able to live an autonomous life. As said, utopian idealism would do this irrespective of how ‘real’ children can be educated, whereas realistic idealism theorises the ideal given the possibilities of real children.

Alternatively, we can theorise about autonomy by starting with ‘our experiences of the features of the [highest forms of autonomy] we actually enjoy as imperfect moral beings’.\(^\text{74}\) That would lead us to start from a position of acknowledgment of an inherent dilemma when theorising about autonomy, because an individual’s autonomy is usually the outcome of a better or worse ‘trade-off’ between different values, negotiated with different people who all want to self-govern their lives. This approach has the advantage of recognizing how it is typical of autonomy – in light of everything one values – to be a compromise, because, for example, parents who love their children may sometimes be most happy if they can make their children happy, also when that means that the parents cannot pursue their own autonomy.

The difference between the forms of theorising about autonomy, ideal (utopian or realistic) and nonideal, is twofold. Not only the process of theorising, but also the ideal is different. As described, ideals can move on a spectrum of realisability.\(^\text{75}\) Utopian ideal theory describes the perfect

\(^{73}\) Cf. Hall 2016, pp. 91-92. ‘Autonomy’ is argued by White 2011 to be an important educational aim and part of flourishing, and the ‘right to self-government’ by Brighouse 2006.

\(^{74}\) Hall 2016, p. 91.

ideal, i.e. what is logically possible, whereas both realistic idealism and nonideal theory develop ideals that are educationally, sociologically, anthropologically or politically possible,\textsuperscript{76} i.e. common ideals.\textsuperscript{77} Nonideal theory, however, is concerned with the actual situation and what is actually possible, whereas it seems that the realism of realistic idealism remains limited to what is possible in the world as it is (as opposed to denying fundamental features of the world), even if it may not be realisable in the actual situation.

But the crucial difference between ideal theory (whether utopian or realistic) and nonideal theory is how the theory is constructed. Ideal theory, including realistic ideal theory, starts by theorising the ideal, and as such constructs its theory around the (albeit common) ideal, making it the centre of gravity. In the example of a nonideal theory of autonomy given here, by starting at the nonideal constrained experiences, the theory is constructed around the actual, thus making the actual its key focus. Even though a similar kind of ideal is constructed as in realistic ideal theory, they have a different position and therefore value in the theory. On the level of nonideal theory on education for autonomy this might lead to theorising how parents or teachers can help children learn to deliberate about different values children themselves have, and with regard to other people’s desire for autonomy (instead of for example learning what choice would optimise their autonomy). Children (and educators too for that matter) might learn to see themselves as dependent on each other in making autonomous choices. This compromise-character will be the central feature of such a nonideal theory, and the theory’s aim will be to provide tools to cope with the ideal of education for autonomy in the real, actual world.

As shown with these examples, nonideal theory can avoid certain problems we have discussed in relation to ideal theory. We have given two worthwhile options of nonideal theorising. The ‘radical’ suggestion of prioritising theorising about fulfilling children’s basic needs instead of theorising about ideals, and the less radical option of starting with, and centralizing the actual world in reflecting on what might be ideal. This is not to argue that nonideal trumps ideal theory, we have not argued that all forms of ideal theory are necessarily problematic. Yet, exclusive reliance on ideal theory is unacceptable, and misses out opportunities to navigate real world problems.\textsuperscript{78} At the moment, the balance is skewed toward ideal theory, therefore we need more nonideal theory to create a better balance.

A suggestion for the form or style in which such nonideal theorising can be done is given by Avishai Margalit who distinguishes between ‘i.e. philosophy’ and ‘e.g. philosophy’.\textsuperscript{79} I.e. philosophy

\textsuperscript{76} See Schmidt 2016, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{77} De Ruyter 2007, p. 25.
\textsuperscript{78} See Frazer 2016.
\textsuperscript{79} Margalit 2002.
Chapter 3

refers to philosophy as explication, based on conceptual analysis. Examples are only used to further explicate, they are add-ons, not central to the theory. E.g. philosophy on the other hand, sees philosophy as exemplifying, based on real-life examples. The example of theorising autonomy could have the form of starting with a real-life example of the choices one has (had) to make, to derive from that the characteristics of ideal (in this world) autonomy. As such it would be logically constrained by our experiences, because it would start from the actual as opposed to from the ideal. This style would have the additional advantage of ‘populating’ the theory, as suggested by Cigman.\textsuperscript{80}

3.6 Conclusion

We have shown that the arguments against exclusive reliance on ideal theory from literature on theories of justice also apply to educational theory on flourishing. We have also given arguments why ideal theory can be worthwhile. The function of simplification and abstraction of idealisations, and the direction-giving function of idealisations and (regulative) ideals all show that it can be beneficial to make an ideal ‘blueprint’ of the flourishing life before equipping children to be able to live one.

There are two conclusions we wish to draw from our discussion. First, we have found that often in theory on education for flourishing it is not made explicit whether flourishing – and education for flourishing – is to be seen as an ideal and, more importantly, whether the theory is regarded as ideal theory or nonideal theory. We think it would be good if both would be specified more often, because this creates room to also address the limitations of the theories. If theories on education for flourishing aspire to go beyond an inspirational role, the limitations of ideal theory should be recognised, and more thought should go to whether the idealisations that are put forward can be justified. Secondly, we think that nonideal theory on education flourishing should be encouraged, because it can address issues in the actual educational practices that current theories seem to overlook.

\textsuperscript{80} Cigman 2018.