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BETWEEN SCREENS AND THOUGHTS: TOWARDS A REFLECTIVE EDUCATION IN DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS

*Entre pantallas y pensamientos: hacia una educación
reflexiva en entornos digitales*

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ABSTRACT

The research question that has prompted this work is: what are the characteristics of the current lifestyle in Western societies that have led to the deficit of reflection in which we are immersed? My working hypothesis is that this decline in reflection proceeds from the constant state of alertness that contemporary society imposes. To demonstrate this, I have explored the factors that contribute to it and which, by converging, reinforce one another. These factors include: the hyperactivity inherent in digital life; the obligation that positive thinking imposes on us to achieve a happy and successful life; the pressure to increase our performance and strive for continuous improvement; the pandemic of narcissistic individualism; and changes in neural

circuits due to cerebral plasticity caused by digital interruptions and the resulting changes in the structure of attention.

The interplay of these factors is significantly influenced by the positivity–negativity dialectic, which is at the heart of the substitution of reflection with endless activity. None of this scenario is alien to the educational world, instead it permeates it from school to university. Therefore, the conclusion is a proposal to reclaim reflection in the educational realm and, along with it, cultural transmission and the ideal of an intellectual and contemplative life. Only in this way can we help our young people to overcome the isolation of individualism by integrating them into the community that is inherent in intellectual life.

Keywords: education; hyperactivity; happiness; individualism; attention; reasoning; humanities; cultural heritage.

RESUMEN

La pregunta de investigación que ha desencadenado este trabajo es la siguiente, ¿qué características del estilo de vida actual en las sociedades occidentales han propiciado el déficit de reflexión en el que estamos sumidos? Mi hipótesis de trabajo es que este declive de la reflexión procede del estado de alerta permanente al que nos conduce la sociedad contemporánea. Para mostrarlo, he indagado en los factores que lo producen que, al converger, se potencian entre ellos. Estos factores son la hiperactividad propia de la vida digital; la obligación que nos impone el Pensamiento Positivo para conseguir una vida feliz y exitosa; la presión por aumentar nuestro rendimiento y por la mejora continua; la pandemia de individualismo narcisista; las alteraciones de los circuitos neuronales debidas a la plasticidad cerebral y producidas por las interrupciones de la conexión digital continua, y los cambios que esto produce en la estructura de la atención.

En la interrelación de estos factores juega un papel primordial la dialéctica positividad-negatividad que se haya en el núcleo de la sustitución de la reflexión por la actividad inagotable. Todo ese panorama no es ajeno al mundo educativo, más bien lo ha permeado desde la escuela hasta la universidad. Por eso la conclusión es más bien una invitación a recuperar la reflexión en el ámbito educativo y, con ella, la transmisión cultural y el ideal de vida intelectual y contemplativa. Solo así podremos ayudar a nuestros jóvenes a superar el aislamiento del individualismo al incorporarlos a la comunidad propia de la vida intelectual.

Palabras clave: educación; hiperactividad, felicidad; individualismo; atención; razonamiento; humanidades; herencia cultural.

1. INTRODUCTION

Complaining that new generations are unable to reflect as a result of the contemporary life style is already something of a cliché. This complaint requires us to delve into the forces that cause it if we are not to repeat the error that we

identify. My hypothesis is that one of the main causes of this decline is the state of constant alert we live in (Wolf, 2020, p. 136), caused by the hectic digital life and by the pressure we are under to achieve a positive, successful and happy life (Han, 2021, pp. 19–28; Pérez et al., 2018, pp. 18 and 237). This has more profound consequences than just an apparent lack of time to think. On the one hand, the industry of optimism and happiness is banishing from the popular imaginary the notion of negativity (Ehrenreich, 2011, p. 68), despite it being absolutely indispensable for reflection (Han, 2020, p. 55). On the other hand, permanent connectivity is transforming the neuronal functionality that is necessary for reflection (Desmurget, 2023, p. 143). These two matters—the search for happiness and constant connectivity—are connected to one another and mutually strengthen one another, replacing the calm of thought with the disquiet of vigilance, provoking the state of constant alert of late modernity.

The aim of this work is to analyse the roots of this lack of reflection, to understand better how it has infiltrated the field of education, to identify the consequences it has had and to consider how it can be overcome: inviting us to reconsider the importance of cultural transfer and to reclaim the ideal of the intellectual and contemplative life.

2. POSITIVE THINKING AND HAPPINESS: ORIGINS OF THE POSITIVITY–NEGATIVITY DUALITY

Happiness is omnipresent nowadays, but it is understood in a different way to Aristotelian *eudaimonia*. As Cabanas and Illouz (2019, pp. 12–13) recall, it is now a set of psychological states that manage the will; it is the result of controlling our inner force and our true self; it is the only objective that makes life worth living; it is the scale that tells us the value of our biography, our successes and failures and the extent of our psychic and emotional development. Happiness is regarded as a central element of what a good citizen should be. Following Moskowitz (2001, pp. 6, 7, 58, 280), Béjar calls this the psychotherapeutic gospel, which revolves around a purely psychological and culturally imposed ideal of happiness (2014, pp. 227–228).

As Ehrenreich explains (2011, pp. 94–109), the historical roots of the transformation of the idea of happiness can be placed in the USA of the 1860s, when positive thinking emerged, promoted by Phineas Quimby and Mary Baker Eddy. This was a rebellion against the Calvinist Puritanism that had caused a pandemic of depression with somatic manifestations across the country. Inspired by the transcendentalism of Emerson and backed by the authority of William James, who publicly claimed to have been cured of depression by positive thinking (Béjar (2014, pp. 234–235) agrees with Ehrenreich on this dual influence), it spread rapidly, insisting on the power of the mind to control the material world and cure ailments, so long as people learn to observe their thoughts and programme their attitudes. With the expansion of modern medicine in the early 20th century, positive thinking lost its therapeutic application

but it survived applied to business to promote success and wealth. Curiously, since its appearance, it has maintained features of the Calvinist Puritanism that it sought to combat: its merciless way of judging (if you fail, it is your fault because you have not tried hard enough) and the constant work of self-examination. Emotions remain as suspect as they are in Calvinism and must be constantly supervised.

Another historic element that favoured the problematic central role of emotions was the reinterpretation of Freud's thought in the USA during the 20th century following a series of lectures he gave there in 1909. This gave rise to the therapeutic emotional style —according to Illouz (2012, pp. 22, 24, 27)— which reconsidered the relationship of the self with itself and with others, synthesising the normal and the pathological within the self. The normal was expanded to include the pathological, becoming problematic as it proved to be hard to achieve. This facilitated the explosion in advice and self-help literature.

The next milestone, according to Ehrenreich (2011, pp. 119–144), came in the 1980s with the restructuring of large corporations that resulted in large-scale lay-offs and caused the recession of the 1990s. In this unstable environment, companies turned to the main product of the positive-thinking industry: motivation. They used courses to motivate people who had lost their jobs to approach this crisis as an opportunity for improvement and to head off complaints, while with people who continued to work in this precarious environment, motivation served to control them and improve their output. Directors also believed this and managers of companies start to be guided by leaders assisted by motivational gurus, instead of by expert managers and the classical advisers. The director, as Marzano (2011, pp. 18–19) noted, started to be a leader who enjoyed risk for personal interest and not in the service of others. There was a move from slow and deep thought —reflection— about decisions to taking fast decisions based on the leader's personal intuition, without reflection and with high risk. This led to the financial crisis of 2008. It is the epoch of irrationality (Ehrenreich, 2011, pp. 130 and 135; Marzano, 2011, p. 17).

Positive thinking has now been revitalised by the positive psychology that Seligman promotes, who suggested promoting the practice of psychology among healthy people. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi launched this inaugural programme in the Manifesto of Positive Psychology. In it they note that, since the second World War, psychology has principally tried to cure and repair damage within a sick model of human functioning. It has hardly focussed its attention on the healthy individual or on prosperous communities. Positive psychology was to be the catalyst for a turn in this focus from the almost exclusive concern with repairing the worst things in life to building positive qualities as well (2000, p. 5).

Positive psychology distanced itself from motivational speakers as it considered them unscientific, although it has taken on some of their practices: self-help books (Prieto-Ursúa, 2006, p. 330), the coaching business, websites requiring payment, etc., and in motivation it has even started to work for companies. This path of continuity includes the Calvinist background that survives in the relation between work and

success. The basic claim of positive psychology is that happiness, optimism, positive emotions and positivity in general are desirable because they lead people to have better health, reach their objectives and succeed (Ehrenreich, 2011, pp. 178, 190–191). To achieve this, hard work on one's thoughts and emotions is needed, suppressing anything that sounds negative. And if this is not achieved, it must be agreed that “the source of failure and lack is personal” (Vassallo, 2020, p. 27) and cannot be attributed to other people or to circumstances.

Precisely because it is aimed at healthy people, it has spread to all social fields. Positive psychology is present in the worlds of business, school, university, health-care, sport, politics, and citizenship and as such it contributes to an unprecedented psychologisation of the social. As long ago as 2002, Held spoke of the tyranny of happiness and today we all find ourselves addressed by what Cabanas (2019, p. 61) calls the perverse logic that tells us that suffering or happiness are personal choices. If people suffer, it is because they want to or because they have been negligent in practising positive psychology. When people who suffer are blamed, it is implied that they deserve it. To suffer is shameful and we feel a moral obligation to strive to be happy, or at least seem to be. “This leads to the cultural imperative to be happy and to disapproval of unhappiness, redefined as negative thinking” (Béjar, 2014, p. 228, own translation). Anything that is negative or adverse or disgusts us must be eliminated. This includes casting aside negative people, something that, as well as being a piece of advice to improve our well-being, is also a warning of the ostracism we face if we dare to defy the imperative to be happy (Ehrenreich, 2011, p. 69).

Positive thinking has managed to introduce into the popular consciousness the idea that negativity must be eliminated or repressed as something immoral and uncivic, practising constant vigilance and control of oneself. This affects our capacity to reflect for two reasons. Firstly, negativity is necessary for reflection because it is essential if we are to come into contact with reality; indeed, one of the criticisms that has been made of psychology is that it fosters positive illusions or creative self-deception, applying a bias to everyday life (Held, 2002, p. 976). However, there is another weightier reason; negativity allows a type of interruption that is necessary for thinking as not all interruptions are equal. As Byung-Chul Han (2020, p. 51) argues, we live in a time that is very poor in interruptions and reflexive pauses but is plagued with interruptions that are informational or involve data.

The type of interruption that causes reflection is the negative power to say “no”, to pause. “Reflection is a faculty that does *not act*. It implies that we stop and pause, as an *interruption, inactivity*” (Han, 2023, p. 47). In this way the positive power to act can be interrupted to avoid falling into a fatal hyperactivity. Applied to thought, reflection is impossible if we only use the passive power to *think something* because this power only permits us to continue thinking. In contrast, the negativity of the “no” is what is characteristic of contemplation; it is not passivity, it is essential in order to reflect on what one has thought about. Saying “no” interrupts activity, it is an exercise in sovereignty and liberty. Passivity would reside in the condition of only

having positive power because, as it cannot stop itself, thought would be permanently exposed to the object; and perception also, would not cease to be perceived. Paradoxically, hyperactivity is a passive form of activity that would not allow any free action; it is a continuum that cannot be stopped; it is a unilateral act of making the positive power absolute (Han, 2020, pp. 49–50, 54–55). For its part, inactivity is not a weakness, but rather a type of intensity: it is a form of splendour of human existence (Han, 2023, p. 11) because it is the entrance to contemplation and reflection.

3. THE SOCIETY OF PERFORMANCE

This hypertrophy of positivity is provoking deep social changes. As we have to be happy and to do so it is key to analyse success, we find ourselves compelled to perform more every day. Thanks to excess positivity, we are enmeshed in a society of performance as the result of a paradigm shift of global dimensions, which is woven around the concept of positivity and its opposite —negativity— and which unfolds itself from the analysis of performance and violence (Han, 2020, pp. 14–15, 21, 23–24). Sugarman and Thrift (2020, p. 818) point to this phenomenon when they say that, in the neoliberal context of an indefinite continuum of acceleration, we are immersed in a culture of urgency that demands more and faster production to satisfy any desire instantaneously.

In this society, people are entrepreneurs of themselves, they are moved by their projects, initiatives and motivation, convinced that they have an unlimited power to act understood as capacity (Han, 2020 pp. 25–27). Positive psychology has convinced the citizens of the 21st century of the mind's power over reality and that success depends on their effort, thus turning the individual into an *animal laborans*, in whom liberty and coercion coincide. The citizen imposes the free obligation to maximise performance on itself, and when this imperative is intensified to excess it becomes self-exploitation. Significantly productive because it is accompanied by the feeling of liberty that, owing to the structure of immanent obligation, becomes violence. The mental illnesses typical of the society of performance are pathological manifestations of this paradoxical liberty. Owing to the general drive to increase positivity in the world, the human and society become an *autistic performance-machines*. The exaggerated effort to maximise performance requires negativity to be eliminated because it slows down acceleration (Han, 2020, pp. 30–31, 54). This is a process of unchecked production that tends towards continuous increase (Sugarman & Thrift, 2020, p. 812).

The surplus of acceleration brings with it another surplus, that of stimuli, impulses and information, which has fostered a profound change in the contemporary subject's attention. Attention is a system of organs that acts as the conductor of the brain. Its various networks are key to thought, morality and happiness. But we now find an epidemic of erosion of attention. As we cultivate distracted lives, we lose our capacity to create and preserve wisdom (Jackson, 2008, pp. 14, 26).

Workload increases in proportion with the demand to increase performance. This requires changing how time and attention are managed and turning to multi-tasking. But the major cultural achievements of humanity have required deep and contemplative attention. Nonetheless, the performance society replaces profound attention with the dispersion of hyper-attention, which involves a rapid change of focus between different tasks and sources of information; it is pure agitation that does not generate anything new and reproduces and accelerates what already exists (Han, 2020, pp. 34–35).

4. THE DISPERSION OF ATTENTION IN THE DIGITAL SOCIETY

Ours society is a digital one, something that increases the fragmentation of attention and the cerebral changes that this produces, because the human brain has plasticity and is shaped by experience (Blakemore, 2018, pp. 112, 118–119; Carr, 2011, pp. 40–41, 46). Rapid changes of focus of attention are multiplied in on-line life, causing the brain to gain or lose skills as its neuronal circuits are reorganised as a result of the repetition of this activity. The constant exercise of digital connection means that the new cerebral circuits that are used the most prevail, and the ones that have stopped being used are deleted.

The types of tools we use to support our mental capacity influence this. According to Bell (2000, p. 57), the technological change between the 19th and 20th centuries was the move from electrical technology to intellectual technology (programming, linguistics and algorithms); a change that derives from the codification of theoretical knowledge. We are now in a moment of profound transformation of intellectual technology, which, like all instruments, also has an ethics, consisting of a series of assumptions about how the human mind should function (Carr, 2011, pp. 62–63). When we move from the world of the printed page to the world of the screen, this new intellectual ethics appears and with it neuronal circuits are again restructured.

The era of the printed page allowed our predecessors to follow a line of argument by developing in-depth linear reading. This shaped their brains in a disciplined way through calm, silent and continued reading, making them more contemplative, reflexive and imaginative (Carr, 2011, p. 98). Reading and writing fostered ever more sophisticated intellectual skills, which became part of our intellectual heritage. The organisation of the reading brain includes time to think, which gave our intellectual capacities an unprecedented boost (Wolf, 2008, pp. 251 and 255). The current problem is whether we lose a large part of them when we dedicate ourselves to reading brief fragments of hypertext instead of reading long printed texts (Wolf, 2020, pp. 14, 98–99, 104).

If, as Desmurget (2023, p. 136) claims, an interruption does not have to be persistent to have a harmful effect on someone's train of thought, what will its influence be like when we live in a situation of constant interruption? As Doctorow

(2009) notes, we are surrounded by an ecosystem of technologies of interruption. However, this is not the interruption of the negativity that promotes reflection; instead, it is the distracting interruption that accelerates performance. Until the 21st century, there had been no medium like the internet, designed to disperse our attention so constantly and persuasively: interaction, hyperlinks, searches, multimedia, etc.

Profound reflexive thought is impossible in the positive digital society because of cognitive overload and so we become mindless consumers of data (Carr, 2011, p. 155; Teba, 2021, pp. 75, 79–80). By relieving us of repetitive intellectual exercise, computer-based automation also relieves us of profound knowledge (Carr, 2014, p. 104).

Some studies endorse the benefits of linear printed reading, including deeper comprehension and greater retention and learning than is achieved by reading short digital texts filled with links (Van der Weel & Mangen, 2022; Schüller-Zwierlein et al., 2022; Kovač & Van der Weel, 2018). There are also studies that do not find evidence that the interruptions of hyperlinks hinder comprehension and retention (Madrid et al., 2009; Conrady & Bogner, 2016) and some have even identified which computer tools improve learning (Rose & Gravel, 2012).

Desmurget's book *Screen Damage* (2023) is of special interest in this discussion as it contains numerous works of neuroscience on the impact of screens on young people's brains. Desmurget sets out the variety of findings, analysing articles that confirm the benefit of screens for improving attention, and other—more numerous ones—that state the opposite. He provides an interpretative key for understanding this contrast when he recalls the distinction between diffuse, exogenous or visual attention on the one hand and focussed, profound and maintained attention on the other. He cites studies that have found that playing computer games has a positive effect on strengthening attention; albeit solely on diffuse or exogenous attention provoked by constant external stimuli. He also lists numerous studies that find that the constant use of screens hinders the acquisition of focussed and profound attention, the type of attention used in intellectual activities such as reading a printed book or reflection. He ultimately concludes that paper supports comprehension more than screens (pp. 117, 132–133).

There is no doubt that constant digital connection promotes multitasking, partial attention, interrupted concentration and the fragmentation of knowledge. So much so that it produces changes in functional cerebral connectivity especially associated with selective attention (Hu *et al.*, 2022, p. 2272), keeping us in a state of constant alert, something that is not an advance but rather a backwards step. This is characteristic of animals as it is essential for survival in the jungle: they constantly monitor their surroundings whatever activity they are doing (Ehrenreich, 2011, p. 241). They cannot stop to contemplate what is in front of them and forget their background: this would mean certain death. Something similar happens to the subject of performance who cannot pause attentively in something because the accelerated pace of

the system prevents it from doing so. In a way, “recent social developments and the structural change of wakefulness are bringing human society deeper and deeper into the wilderness” (Han, 2020, p. 34). The hyperactive-ego does not have access to profound and contemplative attention. It is distant from the contemplative life and all of its riches. It loses the capacity to emerge from itself that this life provides as it makes it possible to access the being of things.

5. THE EPIDEMIC OF INDIVIDUALISM

While it may sound paradoxical, the contemplative life favours going beyond individualism because it facilitates contact with reality and with others. It is no wonder that in the frantic society of the 21st century, where the calm of contemplation and reflection is made impossible, an epidemic of individualism has spread, fed by positive thinking’s insistence on ceaseless vigilance over one’s own self, and amplified by the potent digital projection.

Thanks to its Calvinist roots, the ethics of happiness preserves the need for constant alertness, but it changes the focus of this vigilance, turning it towards the individual and not towards reality and circumstances. The search for happiness is implemented from the level of hyperindividualism (Ruiz Sánchez, 2019, p. 35). Each individual must constantly examine itself, concerned with its own expectations and negative thoughts so that it can redirect them immediately (Ehrenreich, 2011, pp. 110, 114). The contemporary person’s depression is caused by an excessively tense, over-excited and narcissistic relationship with the self that comes to assume destructive features (Han, 2020, p. 87). According to Lipovetsky, narcissism is the form that the *aggiornamento* of individualism adopts. It is the symbol of the move from limited individualism to total individualism. It is the symbol of the second individualist revolution, which forms part of postmodernity, fostering an individuality that is endowed with a destabilised and tolerant psychological sensibility and centres on the emotional realisation of oneself (1987, p. 12). To achieve this realisation, emotions have become a basic product that occupies important sectors of the contemporary economy. Illouz uses the neologism *emodities*, derived from the *commodities*, to refer to the central economic position of emotions and how this production is vital for understanding contemporary emotional subjectivism (2019, p. 23).

In the exaltation of individualism, the trend of positive thinking to privatise pain has been paramount. It is something that is solely the task of the individual and it is his or her responsibility to overcome it. Suffering ceases to have a social meaning because it is the fault of the individual. This imputation has contributed to the increase in mental illnesses over recent decades. And we should not forget another dramatic consequence, namely the repression of the truth, because eliminating pain impedes knowledge, reflection and criticism because pain is also transmitted socially and can be an expression of protest against some social imbalance. But when pain

it made private, it becomes something that each individual is obliged to combat; failure must be overcome to achieve success, even at the cost of our psychological health. In this palliative society, revolution is substituted by depression, and people turn to pharmaceuticals and constant online connectivity as powerful anaesthetics to mask this deep pain (Han, 2021, pp. 25–26).

So, it is clear that the science of happiness involves an individualistic conception of human well-being that is blind to the requirements of the common good. Something that Mogollón calls the individualisation of social responsibility (2019, p. 159). In the field of education, following Martin and McLellan (2013, p. 157), after decades of programmes centred on the psychological development of the self, promoting its well-being, self-control and self-esteem, in the early years of the 21st century, the excesses of the narcissistic attachment to the self, to one's own interests and projects without explicit consideration of the common good and the interests of others were ever more notable.

Seligman's happiness formula is a graphic example of this. He proposes it in *Authentic happiness* (2003, pp. 71 and *passim*), claiming that 85% or 92% of human happiness is due to individual and psychological factors, while circumstances (purchasing power, studies, race, religion, health, social relations, etc.) play an insignificant role. Therefore, the search for happiness does not include the aspiration to achieve social improvements or to expand the common good.

A large body of research has shown the clear individualism that underpins the apparently scientific study of human happiness (Richardson & Guignon, 2008, pp. 606–609; Becker & Marecek, 2008, pp. 1768–1769), to the extent that it makes happiness a problem for people who do not have problems (Binkley, 2017, p. 38). Some studies underline the aspiration to moral neutrality and the lack of interest in moral values (Robbins & Friedman, 2017, pp. 15 and *passim*), social justice and context —Fernández-Ríos and Comes (2009, p. 10) speak of a contextual individualism— or, if this apparently scientific study of human happiness takes them into account, it is not capable of showing their intimate relationship (Di Martino *et al.*, 2017, pp. 99–100, 106). Without explicitly departing from positive thinking, Vassallo (2020) analyses a number of its assumptions and consequences in a work dedicated to showing how a radical individualism is cultivated in school contexts, with the promotion of continuous improvement through personal effort.

So, scientific study of happiness appears to provoke the same malaise that it seeks to remedy. If happiness correlates closely with individualism, pursuing happiness and annulling pain will lead to the consequences of individualism: solitude, egotism, anxiety, disillusionment (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019, pp. 63, 67, 78).

However, individualism greatly hinders the possibility of the contemplative or reflexive life because it requires a community. On the contrary, in the second individualistic revolution that we are living through, the *res publica* lacks solid foundations, and the crucial questions about collective life are trivialised. When the weight of the public space is reduced, the priorities of the private sphere increase. We are no

longer connected by common interests: there is an individualistic disaggregation of the social body and a new meaning of the interhuman relationship based on indifference (Lipovetsky, 1987, pp. 5, 13, 194).

6. EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS, INTELLECTUAL LIFE AND COMMUNITY

This social panorama of vertiginous activity, fragmented attention, psychologisation of life and radical individualism has also made its way into the field of education. Helliwell et al. (2019) note that since 2008 positive thinking has permeated education, starting in schools and spreading to universities; the emotions have been prioritised in every learning experience (Solé, 2020, p. 111); the old concern with emotional control set out by the positivist pedagogy of the early 20th century has been recovered and reinforced (Abramowski & Sorondo, 2023, p. 174). All of this has been through programmes that were very well received—as Martin and McLellan (2013, pp. 45, 49, 54–55, 157) note—by a society interested in education for personal development; reflected, not only in the education of the intellect, but above all in a pedagogical concern with improving students' self-esteem, self-concept, self-regulation and self-efficacy. It seeks to make young people entrepreneurs, with great self-confidence and centred on achieving the objectives of their own interests. To the extent that, as Azrak (2020, p. 167) states, educational discourse has gradually abandoned pedagogical debate to focus on learning difficulties that are transformed into illnesses and behavioural disorders. This is an unprecedented process of medicalisation, which places diagnosis and the pathological–individual model at the centre of didactic concerns and treats them as the sole instruments for understanding what happens inside and outside the classroom.

However, these positive education programmes with their high expectations of improvement have not provided the expected results, such as the eradication of violence, drug addiction, bullying, and so on. Instead, it sometimes has adverse and counter-productive effects. Critical voices have been raised from the educational sciences about the implementation of these programmes and their consequences, including from a growing number of positive educators who identify similar deficiencies (Cabanas & González-Lamas, 2021, pp. 67–68).

Ecclestone and Hayes (2008) call this phenomenon the therapeutic turn in education. According to these authors, the emphasis on emotional education and happiness infantilises students and makes them believe that the emotional difficulties that some of them face are normal things that affect us all (p. 44); furthermore, their being constantly attentive to themselves and their feelings is insisted on and unrealistic expectations are fed, for example, searching for the hero inside yourself (p. 72). This causes frustration and feelings of vulnerability, creating a need for them to enter emotional support programmes and making them dependent on all of the machinery of psychotherapy (p. 74). Furthermore, it makes them assume that adults

should constantly listen to the concerns and anxieties of young people, something that has turned humanistic education into humanitarian education, and has subordinated the intellectual to the emotional (p. 64), something they consider a grave error (p. 164). This trend in schools has also entered the world of the university. According to Hayes (2021, p. 8), the dominant culture in universities now is the therapeutic one. An idea that Furedi shares in a work where he collates numerous studies that demonstrate the success of the therapeutic culture.

A large group of professionals is now employed by universities to manage the risks facing students, to counsel them in the practicalities of harm reduction and to provide support that would secure students' well-being. Every university appears to have a well-being web page that offers students a variety of therapeutic services (2017, p. 37).

This turn transforms the university's mission, prioritising the ethical mandate to ensure that its members feel safe; placing greater emphasis on achieving a climate of safety than on promoting a true liberal education (Sugarman, 2020, p. 359). As Solé explains (2020, p. 112), the therapeutic ethos assumes that each person's value depends on his or her constant optimisation through the acquisition of emotional and cognitive management skills. This emotional utilitarianism promotes an integral education directed towards the narcissistic cult. Contemporary hyperindividualism makes itself present in education in this way. But this therapeutic ethos neither corresponds with the ethical character nor with the humanist meaning of integral education. Prieto Egido (2018) explains that this is an ethical action because the whole person is educated, including his or her social dimension, that is to say, the necessary relationship with others and with the world. If the person is reduced by excising its social dimension, the notion of education is also reduced, losing its ethical character as it ceases to be integral. The central position of psychology in the field of education has enabled this reductionism as it undertakes a task that does not correspond to it. In displacing the theory of education, educational psychology seeks to mark the aims of education in terms of models of healthy living and well-being, dealing with an idea of a person who is closed in on him or herself (pp. 309–315).

There is an underlying emotive instrumentalisation here that provides learning techniques, but education should not be reduced to technical responses. Education has an ethical character because it is directed towards an unfinished being that it helps to grow, a being that is also free and so responsible for its actions, in other words, a moral being. That the person is a social being implies that it is free and has to live with its peers. The ethical character of education consists of teaching people to use liberty well. This overcomes the possibilities of the psychology of well-being with its division of positive and negative emotions, that only permit the subject to be guided by what it feels insofar as it produces satisfaction. However, since Aristotle (2018, 1105b25–1106a6), we have known that emotion is inherently morally ambiguous and must be guided by reason

to adapt to the object that provokes it. Therefore, the most important thing in education is not to ascertain that there are positive emotions, ones that make us feel good and that it is necessary to foster. Instead, what is most important is to teach how to identify when an emotion is good—which is not the same as positive—because it is an appropriate reaction to the object or circumstance that provokes it, even if it makes me feel bad. For example, anger is the ethically correct emotion when we encounter attacks on the common good, even if it does not produce any well-being. Psychology lacks resources to establish this. Only the integral education of the person can do so, when it teaches the liberty to desire what is morally good, despite it being costly. By providing arguments, education appeals to the will of the learner so that it freely integrates its emotions to what reason indicates to it as good.

This ethical outlook is very far from the therapeutic turn that carries out a subjectivist reductionism of good, leaving the subject unable to perceive what is inherently good, beyond its satisfaction or well-being. Perhaps the most worrying consequence of this central position of psychology is that it has stripped education of its true ethical character, replacing it with the therapeutic ethos.

In this way, the environment of universities has changed profoundly. It now seems to be a place where it is assumed that staff and students might need guidance to confront all aspects of university life. Ever greater numbers openly present themselves with emotional and social problems. The most brilliant minds now find that seeking truth and wisdom is an emotional routine. What has happened to the life of the mind to make it an emotional rather than a critical business? (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2008, p. 86).

7. IN CONCLUSION

This change has undoubtedly been brought about by many factors. My proposition has been to analyse some of them: the psychologisation of life through the positivity–negativity dialectic; the individualism this entails; changes in attention; the increase in performance and continuous improvement; and the intense digital life of constant connectivity that accompanies all of the previous phenomena and strengthens them to the maximum. Between them all, they have brought about the transformation of the modern mind, in the words of Haidt and Lukianoff (2019). A mind that is unable to reflect because it is characterised by features that are opposed to the contemplative life: it is centred on its experiences, permanently alert and watching itself, not allowing itself the rest that comes from stopping, always active, with a superficial and fragmented capacity for attention. It is precisely reflection, which opens the door to the contemplative life, that is the opposite. It comprises an attitude of openness towards reality that lowers the levels of alertness that interrupt any other activity and it pays profound, intense and unique attention.

Through its capacity for openness, reflection makes it possible to access our cultural heritage, which is not an erudite accumulation of information, but rather the process of becoming part of a living community that shares its legacy with us. Intellectual life builds a community; culture is related to interpersonal ties while a lack of culture is related to individualism. This is the key to explaining the miracle of cultural transmission.

As Hitz says, learning enables us to have a space for connection that goes beyond merely social aspects such as obtaining approval or establishing authority or prestige; instead, we forget our differences as we concern ourselves with a shared goal. But the intellectual life offers something more. Books, ideas, ordinary reflections on life are ways of thinking about what we have in common with other human beings: for example, about our strengths and weaknesses, the family, love, knowledge or the meaning of life. When the idle mind turns itself towards a shared search for self-understanding through novels, films, history or philosophy, the humanity that we share opens itself up in all of the fundamental aspects of life. Humanistic learning and the intellectual life have the power to form unusual and extraordinary types of ties, based not on instrumentalisation of the person but rather on mutual respect; this involves a genuine connection with other human beings, feeding genuine forms of community and communication. The world of literature, for example, contains a universality; when we read, we escape from our particular circumstances to connect with those human realities that can occur without the historical period or the place mattering. In enabling us to connect with human beings from other times and places, the intellectual life preserves the individual by identifying it as a member of a wider human community, thus revealing a dignity that is shared with others (2022, pp. 124-129).

The condition that makes the creation of this community possible is the communication of the cultural heritage that makes us understand ourselves as people and so as social beings. This is what is very problematic nowadays, as Solé (2020, p. 113) notes, because the void that the individualist aspiration to happiness hides is made apparent when the task of education is subordinated to the development of emotions, which are turned into objects that can be transformed by strategic actions at the margins of any cultural content. So, education's cultural offer is reduced to the transmission of this void. Bornhauser and Garay (2023, p. 112) underline that the WHO's description of emotions as *life skills* makes this void palpable because it cannot specify the type of life for which these skills prepare people. Something that again makes apparent the loss of the ethical character of education subordinated to the development of the emotions.

Therefore, to undo the current situation and achieve a more reflexive educational culture in schools and universities, one that approaches the ideal of the intellectual and contemplative life described above, it is not enough to propose what Ehrenreich calls post-positive thinking, which consists of healthy vigilant realism (2011, pp. 236, 238, 216). It is also necessary to focus on introducing

future generations to our cultural heritage, which is vitally transmitted through a true human coexistence.

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