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# The 'person of moral growth': a model of moral development based on personalist virtue ethics

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## ABSTRACT

Moral development is crucial for a meaningful life. Many well-founded approaches and models are present in the moral development literature, which is a very diverse and populated field. The model of a 'person of moral growth' presented in this paper is a contribution to moral growth research based on personalist virtue ethics. Personalist virtue ethics puts the person at the centre of the moral reflection, addressing the holistic interplay of the person's dimensions in the process of moral growth. The model is an operationalization of the person's dimensions for educational and research purposes in the field of moral development. In this paper, the four components of the model are presented: emotional-cognitive, decisional (free commitment to moral growth), practical (moral growth through personal action), and self-understanding (the moral growth identity), and the process of the elaboration of the model is explained. For enhancing the construct validity of the model, its components and pedagogical implications are discussed in the light of recent moral education literature. This model is a contribution to a more cogent moral education and is helping to design and deliver moral educational experiences which address personal moral development in a clear, convincing, and well-structured way.

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## 1. Introduction

The education of a moral character has long been considered as an essential part of 21st century school education (e.g. Fadel et al., 2015; Retnowati et al., 2018; Singh, 2019); and during and after the pandemic, moral education at school has become more urgent [e.g. International Commission on the Futures of Education (ICFE), 2021; Stevenson, 2022; De Ruyter et al., 2022; for an overview of recent academic discussions, see Kristjánsson, 2021].

Moral development is a very diverse, multifaceted concept, which includes several complementary aspects, namely, subjective aspects such as moral motivation (Colby & Damon, 1993; Krettenauer, 2022; Pérez Guerrero, 2022), moral emotions (Ginsborg, 2016; Kristjánsson, 2018), and moral identity (Morgan & Fowers, 2022); factual aspects, such as moral action (Cashman & Cushman, 2020; Vigo, 2008) and moral habituation (Athanasoulis, 2024; Robson, 2015); and social aspects, such as friendship (Kristjánsson, 2022; MacIntyre, 2019) and social relationships (Akrivou & Fernández González, 2021; Bernacchio, 2018; Underwood & Moore, 1982).

An examination of the scientific literature on moral development demonstrates that it is a very scholarly populated field, in which many theories, conceptions and approaches to development and models linked with different research streams and schools complement, or compete with, each other. Early influential models of moral development highlighted specific universal values. For instance, Dewey's

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(1909) empiricist model posits the growth of consciousness as a precursor to moral goodness; Kohlberg's (1981, 1984) cognitive moral development model highlights a structured advancement in moral reasoning based on principles of justice; and Noddings (1984) approach focuses on a situational ethic of care, emphasizing moral affect as a fundamental and universal element of human nature. Other prominent models of moral development are in dialogue with these early models. For example, Turiel's (1983) Domain Theory of Moral Development addresses Kohlberg's critique to mainstream psychological approach to moral development (as being flawed due its ignorance of definitional and scientific bases of moral reasoning) by suggesting a domain approach whereby the Moral Domain (justice, fairness), the Social-Conventional Domain (social norms), and the Personal Domain (preferences, autonomy) are governed by distinct sets of rules defining how children and adults reason about moral issues.

Another line of inquiry to moral development emphasizes the aim of flourishing and character cultivation for moral development. Some of these approaches are not specifically based on Aristotelian Character education. For instance, the so-called The Berlin wisdom paradigm (Banicki, 2009) was conceived as a psychological approach to conceptualize wisdom, emphasizing its importance in moral life in the context of human development and flourishing. Different models in this project are offered by Ardel (2004), Baltes and Staudinger (2000) and Grossmann et al. (2020). The Values in Action (VIA) model for character development (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), was also identified as an influential non-Aristotelian approach to character development (Kristjánsson, 2019). It encourages moral development by focusing on 24 character strengths under 6 core virtues that are universally valued across cultures and religions, and which are seen as relevant to improve life quality and well-being in personal and professional lives and in society. More recently, De Ruyter et al. (2022) liberal conceptualisation of flourishing emphasizes the optimal development of a person's potentials in order to give a worthwhile and meaningful interpretation to relationships, activities and other such goods, contributing thus in this way both to others' flourishing and to the ability to live a satisfying, meaningful flourishing life.

Among the recent Aristotelian models of flourishing based on character development, Kristjánsson's model of moral development (2019), which adopts neo-Aristotelian principles, is particularly relevant. He sees flourishing as the aim of education and conceptualises character education as one of the 'approaches to values education' (Kristjánsson et al., 2024, p. 1). Following Aristotelian virtue theory (e.g. Sanderse, 2015), this proposal emphasizes the cultivation of virtues through habitual practice leading to flourishing or 'eudaimonia', which integrates emotional and rational elements, and stresses the importance of context and community in nurturing moral life. While, in his conception, an emphasis is given to the development of phronesis (Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2024), further development of this work emphasizes other important virtues, especially the role of friendship and its contribution to phronesis and eudaimonic virtue development (Kristjánsson, 2022). Other Aristotelian models include the 'Neo-Aristotelian Model of Moral Development' of the The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (2022, p. 21), which points to different pathways for moral development from virtue knowledge and understanding to virtue reasoning and virtue practice; the PRIMED Character Education model (Berkowitz, 2021), which defines character as a moral concept, and addresses relationships, intrinsic motivation, role modelling and empowerment in a developmental perspective; and the Aretai Centre's model of moral development (De Caro et al., 2021; Vaccarezza et al., 2023), which is an alternative Aristotelian virtue ethics model focusing on the priority of phronesis, conceived as skill, over individual virtues. It is based on the theory of 'virtue molecularism', which suggests that virtues should be understood as interconnected and guided by practical wisdom, in order to navigate complex moral situations with both intellectual and emotional competence.

Reviewing the above literature demonstrates the diversity and strength of the flourishing and character development approaches to moral growth, with the neo-Aristotelian character tradition being particularly influential and theoretically sound, due to their grounding in classical moral philosophy and its moral realist framework. Notwithstanding the clear advantages of Aristotelian approach to moral character development, Carr (2024) pointed out that character alone is insufficient for fully grasping or fostering moral development and proposed expanding beyond virtues to research moral qualities such as love, justice, and knowledge. Another possible direction for new developments can be discovered in Watts' and Kristjánsson's (2022) concern about the fact that psychology has taken the forefront in recent character research, which has diverted its focus from theoretical and conceptual issues toward more empirical concerns, such as determining 'what works' and how to evaluate its effectiveness.

Meeting the challenge of pursuing theoretical and conceptual research in the field of moral development, the model of a ‘person of moral growth’ presented in this paper is a theory-based contribution to moral growth research and education based on personalist virtue ethics (Akrivou et al., 2018) with an explicit concern for the person and his/her moral growth. The model enriches the neo-Aristotelian tradition by emphasizing the moral development of the whole person and his/her motivation to become a better person, from where all virtues spring. For better capturing the scope and originality of the model, an explanation of what is personalist virtue ethics can be useful.

### **1.1. The perspective of the person for moral development**

Personalist virtue ethics is based on the philosophical-anthropological tradition of personalism (Mounier, 1936; Maritain, 1947; Merleau-Ponty, 1964; Spaemann, 2006; see Burgos, 2018 for an introduction). Personalism treats the human person as an inalienable value and end in herself and stresses the centrality on the person and of human relations. While this tradition includes different versions (idealist, phenomenological, existentialist, and Thomist), all personalist strains coincide in considering the human person as the ultimate ontological and axiological principle of all reality, and as an end in herself, called to growing and flourishing with others. In personalism, the person is addressed in her full richness, complexity, and potentiality as the grounding centre of all action.

The specifics of personalism in comparison with other philosophical systems is that it offers an original explanation of the essence of human beings which is structured around the concept of person itself, combining the spiritual, corporeal, and social aspects. Two key features of contemporary personalism, as developed by various scholars, should be highlighted: a holistic understanding of the person and a specific understanding of relationality. The first key feature involves a holistic view of the person, characterized by four core dimensions. These dimensions are synthesized below with reference to the key contributions from personalist thinkers, all of whom contribute to the understanding of these four dimensions of the person, though each may emphasize different aspects.

1. **Interiority:** This dimension, strongly influenced by the works of Polo (1999) and Marías (1996), refers to the inner world of the person, where their uniqueness, identity, and personal core reside. It is the locus of self-awareness and individual identity, encapsulating the essence of what makes each person distinct. Mounier (1936) also contributes to this understanding by emphasizing the depth of the personal inner life, which he sees as fundamental to human dignity.
2. **Openness:** This dimension refers to the external manifestation of the person through their embodiment and physical presence in the world, encompassing the situational dimensions of time and space, emotional experiences, and communication through language. Merleau-Ponty (1964), with his emphasis on the body as the medium of experience and perception, underscores how personal openness is deeply connected to our corporeality and situatedness in the world. The work of Altarejo and Naval (2000) further highlight the importance of this external engagement.
3. **Dynamicity:** Central to this dimension is the concept of freedom and self-determination, as explored by Biesta (2021) and Pérez Guerrero (2022). Dynamicity involves the capacity for existential choices, reflecting how actions taken in the external world influence personal growth, and how inner convictions drive external activity. This understanding resonates with Maritain’s (1947) view of the person as an active being who expresses their freedom through purposeful action, and with Wojtyła’s (1969) emphasis on the interconnection between the person and her actions.
4. **Dialogical dimension:** This dimension reflects the relational nature of the person, emphasizing the capacity to engage in meaningful interactions—both receiving and giving. Buber (1923) highlighted the importance of dialogue, while Marías (1996) stresses the importance of community, love, and shared knowledge. Spaemann (2006) contributes to this understanding by focusing on the uniqueness of persons as ‘someone’ rather than ‘something’, and on the relational nature of personal existence. Burgos (2018) extends this by arguing for the mutual enrichment that occurs through personal dialogue and community, emphasizing the inherent social dimension of the person.

These four dimensions of the person (interiority, openness, dynamicity, and the dialogical dimension) are intimately interconnected and form an active system crucial to the personalist understanding of the person. In particular, the interconnection between the person's dynamicity and his/her dialogical dimension configures the second key feature of personalism: a specific understanding of relationality.

The relational dimension of human beings is present in many of the previously mentioned models, both at societal level (e.g. the polis as an ultimate moral reference in Aristotle, the civic virtues the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues's (2022) framework, Turiel's (1983) Social-Conventional domain, Bernacchio's (2018) networks of giving and receiving, etc.) and at interpersonal level (e.g. the (neo-)Aristotelian rejection of individualism and its emphasis on the importance of friendships for virtue and flourishing (Kristjánsson, 2022; MacIntyre, 2019), Noddings (1984) ethics of care, Turiel's (1983) focus on fairness to define the Moral domain, Berkowitz's (2021) PRIMED model use of the metaphor that 'the 3 R's' of character education are 'Relationships, Relationships, Relationships', etc.). Recent so-called 'non-Western approaches' to moral growth also highlight the relational dimension of morality, as it can be seen, e.g. in the key virtues of Buddhist flourishing: compassion, loving kindness, sympathetic joy, equanimity in community (Flanagan, 2011). African ethics also integrates harmonious relationships, hospitality, and care for others as core components of Ubuntu—the idea that one is to realise oneself solely through others (Metz, 2021).

In personalist philosophy the concept of relationality holds a unique and foundational significance. The distinguishing feature of relationality in personalist thought is that relationships are integral to the configuration of the personal being. Personalism asserts that a person is a 'relational selfhood' (Gacka, 2023), meaning that the person is not just someone who has, or engages in, relationships, but someone whose own being is inherently constituted, structured through these relationships. Relationships deeply configure the person from within. Therefore, relationality is not only important for flourishing as a person, but for being a person.

As personalism is rooted in Aristotelian Thomistic philosophy, 'relational selfhood' as a core element of personalism is derived from metaphysical and theological foundations, particularly the Christian notion of the Trinity, where God is understood as a communion of persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—each of whom exists only in relation to the others as a 'subsistent relationship'. This Trinitarian model profoundly influenced the personalist view of humans as created in the image and likeness of the relational God. Being a (human) person means 'to be relationship'. The person itself is constituted relationally, not only metaphysically. This understanding of relationality is related to the dialogic dimension of the person and to the existential, dynamic nature of being a person, as the person is continuously formed and reformed in the context of dynamic, freely chosen relationships and dialogue. The person is seen as a relational entity whose moral development occurs through communion with others (including God).

This intrinsic relationality of the person has a determinant importance in the conception of personalist virtue ethics: (1) the person is the absolute value guiding moral life and virtuous action; it is the person who gives meaning to the exercise of virtues (Akrivou & Fernández González, 2021); and (2) the interpersonal sphere is what gives meaning to virtue. Virtues are intrinsically relational because relationships configure the person, who gives meaning to the virtues. Personalist virtue ethics sees the virtuous person as someone teleologically oriented to the flourishing of self and others in their interpersonal relations (Akrivou & Scalzo, 2020). This personalist understanding of the relational selfhood of the person is embedded in the explanation of each component of the model (section 2.2.).

Based on this understanding, in this paper a person is defined as a spiritual being (with interiority and self-awareness), who lives corporally (embodied in time and space) and grows through activity (dynamism and freedom) and interpersonal relationships. However, it should be noted that such a description of a person, strictly speaking, is not a definition. As indicated by Mounier, the founder of European personalism, 'the person actually is the human presence; it cannot be defined, strictly speaking [...] but a person emerges through the decisive experience [...], the gradual life experience, one's personal life experience. No concept can replace this experience. Any argument will be incomprehensible and closed for anyone who has not at least come up to this experience' (Mounier, 1936, p. 46).

The model of a 'person of moral growth' presented in this paper is an effort to translate the person's dimensions (interiority, openness, dynamism, and dialogical dimension) into a model, in which its components can be used as a guide for interpersonal moral growth education, and as a guide for researching moral development.

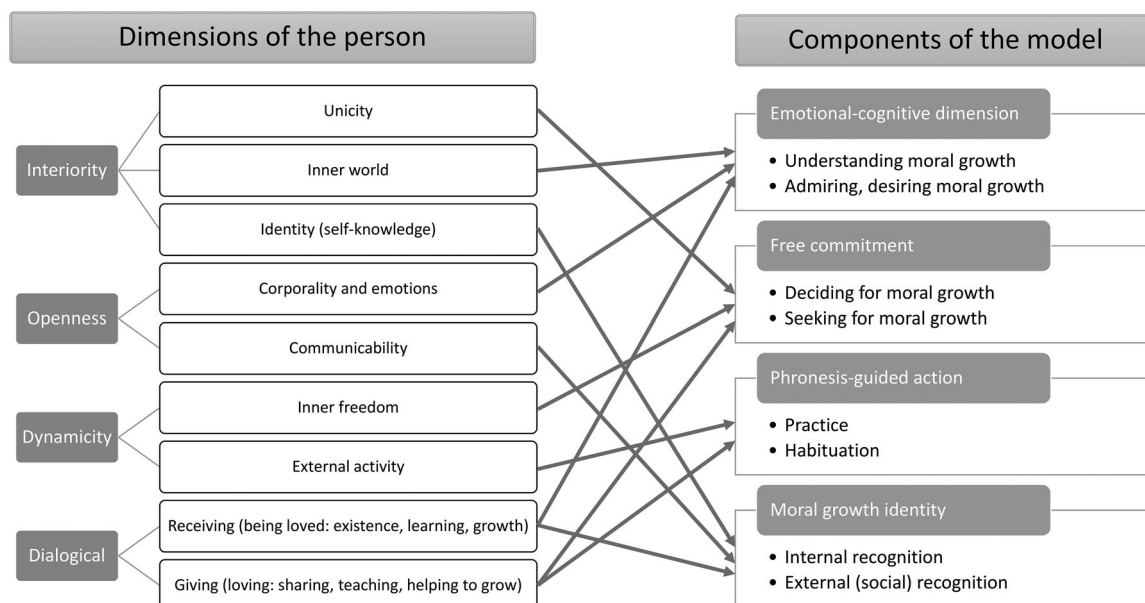
## 2. The model of a 'person of moral growth'

This section first explains how the dimensions of the person were operationalized in the model of a 'person of moral growth', then the components of the model are systematically described, and finally, the process of its conceptual formulation is presented. The description of the components of the proposed model does not refer to character education literature. This latter is the object of [section 3](#), where each component of the model is discussed in the light of recent moral and virtue education literature.

### 2.1. Operationalizing the dimensions of the person in the model

The model of a 'person of moral growth' is an operationalization of the dimensions of the person for educational and research purposes (see [Figure 1](#)). It is also a synthesis of the multiple facets of moral growth, namely, subjective aspects (e.g. moral identity, moral emotions and desires, moral motivation and freedom, moral understanding), factual aspects (e.g. moral habituation, moral life), and social (e.g. moral relationships, moral inspiration from others, moral care for others), which are complementary, into four key processual components. The components of the model are: (1) the shaping of a cognitive-emotional idea of what means to become a person of moral growth; (2) committing to moral growth; (3) phronesis-guided involvement in moral growth; and (4) developing an identity as a person of moral growth (a 'moral growth identity').

These components are like four 'access gates' to the person, they capture four 'modalities' how the person manifests itself, and they can therefore more easily be addressed in education and operationalized in research. The person's interiority is captured by the cognitive component (the 1<sup>st</sup> component of the model) and by the internal recognition aspect of the identity component (the 4<sup>th</sup> component); the person's openness is captured by the emotional aspect of the first component and by the social, external recognition of moral growth identity (the 4<sup>th</sup> component); the dynamism of the person is captured in the 3<sup>rd</sup> component of the model (external activity) and it also appears in the decisional component (the 2<sup>nd</sup> component). Regarding the dialogical dimension of the person, the 'receiving' dimension of the person is captured by the external recognition (in the 4<sup>th</sup> component) and by the 1<sup>st</sup> component (receiving instruction and inspiration); and the 'giving' aspect is captured by the decision of engaging in moral growth for others (the 2<sup>nd</sup> component) and by the practical involvement in moral growth (the 3<sup>rd</sup> component of the model).



**Figure 1.** Dimensions of the person and components of the model of the 'person of moral growth'.



## 2.2. Description of the components of the model of a 'person of moral growth'

### 2.2.1. Emotional-cognitive dimension

The shaping of a cognitive-emotional idea of what means to become a person of moral growth includes several steps: discovering, admiring, and desiring it.

1. *Discovering* of the possibility of moral growth. The awareness of the possibility of growing morally includes a concrete cognitive content: (1) the belief that it is possible to become a better moral person; (2) knowing how the person grows morally (e.g. by acquiring moral habits (virtues), developing a moral selfhood, and internalizing an interpersonal moral motivation); and (3) an understanding of the facilitators of, and the barriers to, moral growth, which includes the importance of growing together with others.
2. *Admiring* with awe the possibility of becoming a better person. This aspect refers to the emotional component of the idea of a person of moral growth, and more generally to the role of emotions in moral growth. It is the admiration of moral growth in oneself or in others. This emotional aspect requires a particular *sensitivity* to the moral domain. While it includes the admiration of *the results* of moral growth, i.e. admiration of particular virtues in action, as well as admiring moral exemplars having a strong moral motivation or high moral conviction and ideals, its distinctive feature is the admiration of the *process of growing* morally, which includes admiring the possibility of acquiring new virtues, of strengthening one's moral growth identity, of finding a higher (interpersonal) moral motivation. It includes also the admiration of exemplars of moral growth (persons who experienced a moral conversion), and a disgust for moral decay processes.
3. *Desiring* to experience such moral growth, to become a better person. In this context, moral resilience is a particularly important emotional-cognitive component of a 'person of moral growth', because the essential feature of a person of moral growth is the stable disposition to growing as a moral person, not the actual moral level already reached. This desire manifests itself by rejoicing and celebrating the discovery of new moral growth possibilities and the moral growth experienced by oneself and others.

### 2.2.2. Free commitment to moral growth

This component captures personal agency as the central element of the making of a person of moral growth. This component is enrooted in the previous one: discovering, admiring, and desiring moral growth can lead the person to decide to engage in and to seek for ways of growing as a moral person and to commitment and engagement despite setbacks. This decision and commitment, which is emotionally and cognitively laden, is conceptually close of what the phenomenologist philosopher Scheler called *Gesinnung*, a 'disposition of the spirit' or 'spiritual posture', which includes a 'direction to the value' but does not possess a representative content (Sánchez-León, 2009, p. 225). Similarly, the person of moral growth has a deep general orientation to moral growth as a fundamental value, while the tendencies that characterize the different virtues have their own 'representative content' delimited by the object of the concrete virtue.

The two main aspects of this component are (1) the decision itself and (2) the mobilization of the will in order to seek for ways of growing. As Vigo (2008) put it, 'Only the person who is able to decide to live a particular way of life, whatever it is, would be able to produce authentic deliberate decisions about a particular course of action' (p. 61). The process for making this decision is very personal: It can crystallize for example through relevant personal conversations, or by experiencing triggering events. For a person of moral growth, this motivation includes necessarily an interpersonal dimension: to become a better person in order to love relevant others better, growing for others' sake. Regarding the mobilization of the will, in an integrative view of moral growth, this commitment is not compulsory. Scheler believed that the *Gesinnung* cannot be educated, but that it develops by 'following a prototype' (Sánchez-León, 2009, p. 376), a moral exemplar which can be proposed to youngsters and adults who wish to grow as moral persons. This could also happen through an external call to a particular way of life made by a relevant person – a friend or a trusted adult.

### **2.2.3. Moral growth through phronesis-guided action**

The person of moral growth is not formed just by a voluntarist decision, but through an organismic acquisition based on action and habituation with the support of significant others. This component has several aspects: (1) Practice, i.e. a real involvement in acts that perfect the person; (2) habituation, which implies not just regular practice (training), but includes a sense of meaningfulness and therefore joy in this process, even when it is hard. (3) For a person of moral growth this is not a solitary process, but it is shared in communities of moral growth. It is not only personal growth with others, but also moral growing through caring for others' moral growth.

In this model, phronesis is understood not just as a self-protective and self-guarding meta-virtue or as the goal of virtue growth, but as part of the relational dimension of the person, which is enriched with loving virtues tied to the profound nature of the human being and our mutual interdependency. This kind of phronesis is crucial for choosing and using the appropriate means for growing as a moral person. In this path, moral failures are also important (Cashman & Cushman, 2020), because, faced with them, the person of moral growth can reactivate his/her deep disposition to moral growth to find there the necessary emotional and psychological resources for recommencing with resilience the struggle for a moral life without discouragement.

### **2.2.4. Moral growth identity: profoundly being disposed to interpersonal moral growth**

This component of the model captures the importance of self-concept in the making of a person of moral growth. The identity of a person of moral growth is the deep-down understanding of oneself as profoundly disposed (emotionally, cognitively, decisively, and practically) to (inter)personal moral growth (growing together with others, for others' sake and through caring for others' growth).

Moral growth identity includes a cognitive-evaluative and an emotional-reactive component. The evaluative component looks at the increase (or decrease) of the disposition to personal moral growth, instead of assessing the attained moral level. In its turn, the emotional aspect of moral growth identity includes moral emotions related to moral growth. Therefore, this component refers to the process where moral growth is personally assessed, and can be internally reaffirmed or questioned, enjoyed or regretted, and refined (discovering aspects for improvement) or progressively abandoned. It also includes the acceptance of one's limits and the need of time for improving (patience).

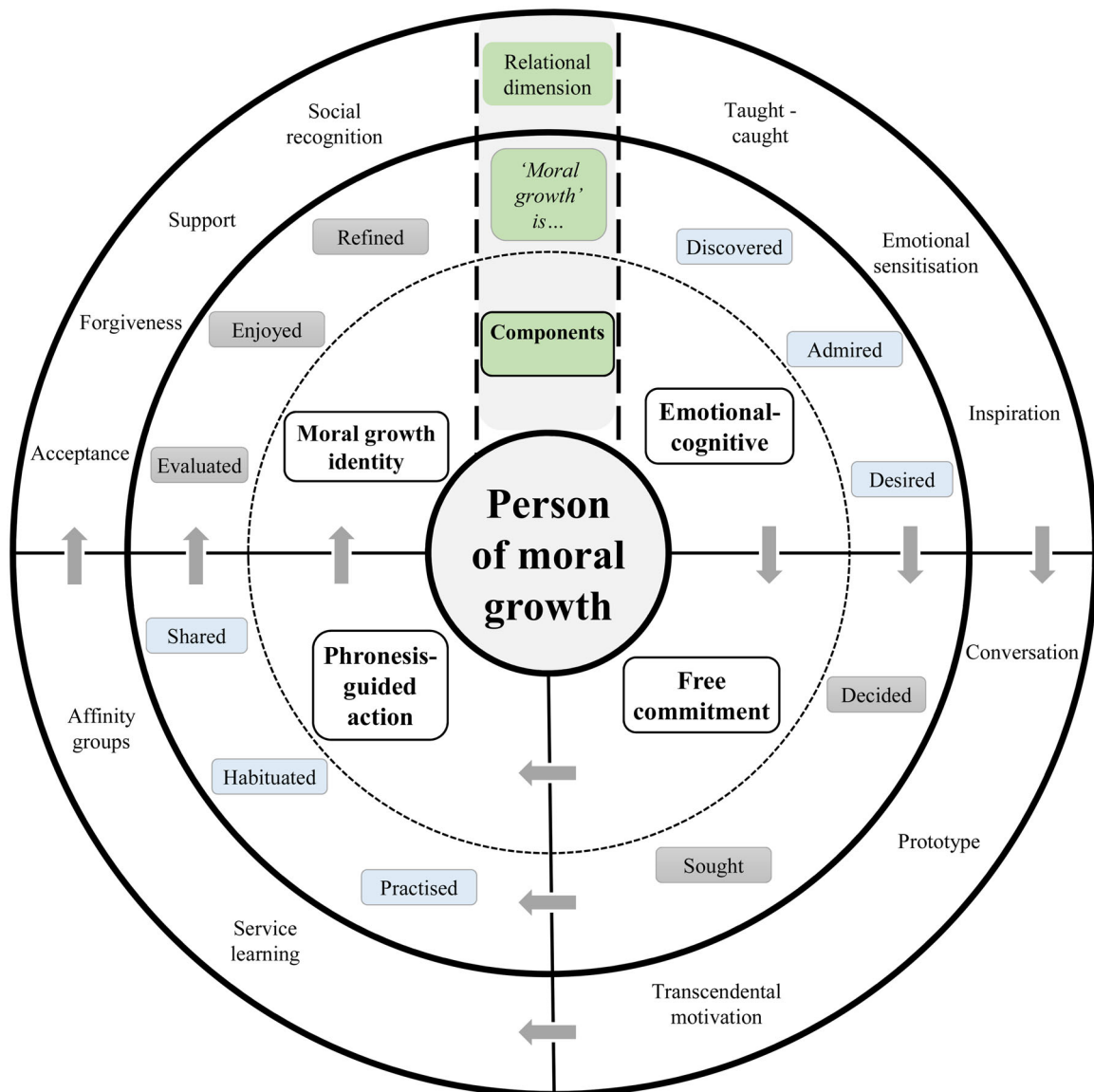
The identity making of a person of moral growth has also several interpersonal aspects, which include social acceptance (perception of the acceptance of moral growth as a value within a group), forgiveness (receiving and giving support after moral failures), receiving support (in the form of advice, instruction, or interest from more experienced people – role models of moral growth) and social recognition (congratulations and other expressions of interpersonal affirmation, acknowledgement or rituals celebrating achievements manifesting moral growth). It should be noted that, in this realist framework, a 'socially situated' (Taylor, 1997) identity as a person of moral growth has the actual person of moral growth as its cognitive object: moral growth identity is the 'self-concept' of a person deeply disposed to (relational) moral growth.

The internal and relational aspects of moral growth identity feed and refine the process of becoming a person of moral growth: cognition and emotions about moral growth are re-questioned and integrated deeper; commitment to moral growth is refuelled; and the phronesis-guided actions that shape the person of moral growth receive internal and external recognition.

The model of a 'person of moral growth' is represented in [Figure 2](#), with the model components in the inner circle and their connection with the relational dimension of the person in the outer circle.

## **2.3. Conceptual formulation of the model: from 'virtue identity' to a 'person of moral growth'**

The model of a 'person of moral growth' presented in this paper is the result of a process of conceptual elaboration and refining, made of questioning and re-questioning the original concept on the light of new 'challenging inputs' coming from moral theory, academic discussion, and personal reflection. The starting point was a subconstruct of moral identity called 'Aristotelian virtue identity'. This concept, which aspired to contribute to the dialogue between moral philosophy and moral psychology, was



**Figure 2.** The model of a 'person of moral growth'.

defined as 'understanding oneself as strongly committed to growing in virtue', which captured both the agentic aspect of moral identity, and the developmental aspect of virtue.

The academic discussion of this first concept pointed to the necessity of making more explicit, in its formulation, the anthropological paradigm in which this concept was grounded. The concept relied on a realistic Neo-Aristotelian understanding of moral development, which holds a distinction between 'Selfhood' (the underlying reality in which identity is grounded) and 'Identity' (the understanding of one's selfhood). Therefore, the concept was renamed 'Virtue selfhood', meaning 'to be strongly committed to growing in virtue', and the term 'Virtue identity' was kept as a component of the construct defined as the 'self-understanding of one's Virtue selfhood'.

A further reflection revealed the convenience of giving priority to the self (which is the core of the human being) over the virtue (which is a quality of the self) in the wording of the concept. Therefore, the wording changed from 'Virtue selfhood' to 'Self-of-virtue' (Fernández González, 2019a)

The next development of the concept integrated insights from the philosophy of personalism (Mounier, 1936) and from the theory of the 'Inter-processual Self' (Akrivou et al., 2018; Akrivou & Orón, 2016), which stress the intrinsic relationality of human beings and therefore of the moral growth process. Accordingly, the concept was reformulated as the 'Relational self of virtue', for highlighting the centrality of interpersonal relationships (Fernández González, 2019b).

**Table 1.** Conceptual formulation: from 'Virtue identity' to the 'person of moral growth'.

Challenging question => answer	Decision about the formulation of the core concept	New formulation
–	–	Virtue identity
What is the anthropological paradigm of the model? => Realism.	To reformulate the concept, giving priority to selfhood over identity	Virtue selfhood
What is central in the model: the self or the virtue? => The self	To reword the concept, giving priority to the self over virtue	Self-of-virtue
How does the model include the centrality of interpersonal relations for moral growth? => integrate relationships in the model	To reformulate the concept, highlighting its relationality	Relational self of virtue
Is moral development reducible to virtue in the model? => No, moral development is wider than virtue	To replace 'virtue' with 'moral growth' in the wording of the concept	Relational self of moral growth
What is the core of the model: the self or the person? => The person, which is itself a relational concept	To replace the expression 'relational self' with the word 'person'.	Person of moral growth

The next development acknowledged that, in the model, the person's morality cannot be reduced to virtue: it also includes motivation, moral identity, moral conscience. And also, that the model is a developmental one, oriented to moral growth. Therefore, the word 'virtue' was replaced with the expression 'moral growth', resulting in the new formulation: 'Relational self of moral growth'.

A final step in the concept development was inspired by deepening the insights of the personalism philosophy. In the wording of this new model, the concept of 'person' is used instead of 'relational self' for two reasons: The concept of 'person' captures radically the intrinsic relational dimension of human beings better than the concept of 'relational self'. The self can have relationships with other selves (relationality as an operational characteristic of the self), while the person is itself constituted relationally, not only metaphysically (relationality is a constitutive feature of the person). Given that the concept of person is intrinsically relational, saying 'a person of moral growth' is the same as saying 'a person of interpersonal moral growth'. In addition, the concept of 'person' is wider than the 'self', as it includes also the biological, corporeal dimension of human beings, through which his/her relational constitution becomes manifest to others. Table 1 summarises the main steps of this conceptual development.

### 3. The components of the model in moral education literature

For enhancing the construct validity of the model (Strauss & Smith, 2009), in this section each component of the model is discussed in the light of recent moral and virtue education literature. In educational research, construct validity must be investigated whenever no other current concept is accepted as entirely adequate to define the quality to be measured (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955), which is the case of the model presented in this paper. Typically, construct definition and theory articulation happens through an iterative inductive process of theory refinement and elaboration, contrasting the new construct with existing theories and models to highlight its specificity. The following discussion broadens and nuances the understanding of the components of the model, and points also to possible setbacks in its application in education and research.

An initial observation was that the four components of the model are linked to rich scholarly conversations about moral education: the first component is related to the debate on moral emotions and moral cognition; the second component is linked to discussions about moral motivation and moral decisions; the third component addresses the domain of moral behaviour and habituation; and the fourth one refers to the broad field of moral identity. What the model of the person of moral growth adds is that it integrates, in a unifying system centred on the person, insights from different moral education approaches that are somehow disconnected in the scientific literature.

#### 3.1. The emotional-cognitive component in moral education literature

A number of moral theories stress the importance of both reasoning and emotions in developing morality, captured by the first component of the model. Aristotle already suggested that emotions, thinking, and reasoning are closely connected and important for personal flourishing. According to him (NE, Rhetoric), emotions are not just feelings but are crucial for growing morally and achieving a virtuous

character. Kant also addresses the interplay between emotions and cognition in his theory of cognition, which includes moral cognition: he speaks of the 'affective perception', a feeling of harmony and agreement between the faculties, which, for him, is precisely the judgment of taste or aesthetic judgment (Ginsborg, 2016). More recently, neo-Aristotelian scholars had also addressed the importance of the interplay between emotions and cognition in moral life. For instance, Kristjánsson (2010) has presented a quite universal theorisation of the importance of emotions in the construction of the moral self, and later on has also reflected on the centrality of virtuous emotions (reason-responsive; morally evaluable; educable and worthy of education; and constitutive of moral selfhood/identity) in the good life, restoring Aristotle's concern that virtuous emotional experience is an essential ingredient of virtue (Kristjánsson, 2018). And for Annas (2011), 'virtues are dispositions worthy of a distinct kind of admiration, which inspire us to aspire to them as ideals' (p. 6). This admiration of virtue is related to what Kristjánsson (2016) calls the 'enchanted version' of Aristotelian flourishing. An affectively rooted admiration can lead to admiration and desire or aspiration to moral growth. These dynamics can be at the origin of an overall openness to moral growth which has been called 'moral growth mindset' (Han et al., 2020).

As the person is intrinsically a relational being, this component of the model (the internalization and personalization of the cognitive-emotional image of a 'person of moral growth') has also a relational aspect. Taylor (1989) pointed to the relational aspect of the internalization of moral values, which happens through the active critical assessment of other's 'systems of significance'. As Morgan et al. (2017) explain, children 'are likely presented with conflicting value messages depending on context and relationship (i.e. parent-child; teacher-child; peer group etc.) ... and negotiate, reject or accept them' (p. 17).

Several possible setbacks, which should be taken into account when educating the emotional-cognitive component of a 'person of moral growth', were revealed during the reflection about this component in the light of moral literature. Youngsters may not realize the inner resistance or external obstacles that can hinder moral growth, and they could be too naive regarding the possibility of becoming a better person (thinking that it is very easy), or regarding the length of this endeavour (hoping it will be a rapid process), which could result in a rapid discouragement when faced with difficulties. and therefore, it would be necessary to prevent youngsters timely about these possible difficulties. As regards the facilitation of youngsters' admiration for moral exemplars, scholars (Szutta, 2019; Zagzebski, 2017) have pointed to the pros and cons of an exemplarist moral theory view, explaining that admiration of moral exemplars can turn negative and lead to envy and resentment. Another possible setback when addressing this component of the model in education is that young people, in particular adolescents, may have a tendency to focus on the admiration that virtue provokes in others, which could lead to desire the appreciation associated to virtue rather than the virtue itself. Another possible setback would be to direct youngsters' admiration towards the result of the moral growth process (towards the product, i.e. achieved virtue), instead of helping them to also admire the effort that was done to become a virtuous person, one who has worked to morally develop her/himself. Both kinds of admiration should be balanced: excessive utopic admiration of virtue as a result could also demobilize the person – 'it is too beautiful for me; I will never reach this level', and exclusive focus on effort admiration could lead to interpret moral growth as a hard, not natural endeavour, which could also demobilize youngsters, especially adolescents, who often value innate ability more than effort. As regards the education of the desire of becoming a person of moral growth, a possible setback could be youngsters' desire of 'having the experience of being good' rather than desiring being good 'for its own sake'. Another setback could be related to wishful thinking: being content of having the desire of becoming a good person without going to the next step: the personal decision.

### **3.2. The free commitment component in moral education literature**

Moral philosophers and psychologist emphasize the relevance of commitment (but not fickleness or whim) to moral growth. Following Aristotle, Annas (2011) stated that 'a virtue requires a commitment to value' (p. 6); and for Peterson and Seligman, 'the good life reflects choice and will' (2004, p. 10). The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (2022) also points that 'self-determination facilitates the acquisition of good character' (p. 17) and includes 'virtue motivation' ('having a strong desire to act on the

virtues') as one of the components of virtue (p. 10). There is also a general agreement among virtue ethicists on the importance of constancy and integrity for virtue growth (e.g. Robson, 2015).

This component of a 'person of moral growth' is related to Krettenauer's (2022) concept of moral identity motivation. For him, virtue and character require knowledge and motivation, and motivation is twofold: motivation to act virtuously and motivation to acquire virtue. This second kind of motivation is conceptually close to the second component of the model. Motivation to acquire virtue expands to a larger period of time, covers a broad range of situations, often unfamiliar, and includes a motivation for self-improvement. This moral identity motivation is 'approach oriented' (focusses on the ideal to reach, not on the setbacks to avoid), 'internally motivated' (moral growth is valued in itself, not instrumentally), and is sufficiently abstract (commitment to abstract values that apply to a wide range of situations).

Two possible setbacks can appear when addressing this component in education: individualism and voluntarism. As explained above, for a person of moral growth, the commitment to moral growth is not motivated exclusively nor mainly by an individual quest for perfection nor by the desire to be satisfied with oneself as a morally good person; it includes necessarily a crucial interpersonal dimension: to become a better person for others' sake – to love them better, to make them happier. The person of moral growth also acknowledges her own vulnerability and the need of counting on others (friends, relatives, caring persons) to move forward growing as a moral person, instead of being overconfident on the strength of one's autonomous will.

### **3.3. The component of phronesis-guided action in moral education literature**

This component of the model aligns with classical Aristotelian virtue ethics on the theorisation of habit and its importance for moral growth (Athanasoulis, 2024). Wojtyla (1969) had captured the personalist understanding of the relevance of the person's acts to moral growth, which can be briefly summarised by the idea that 'one's action returns to affect the core of the self: a person can become what his/her actions are' (Akrivou & Orón, 2016, p. 232).

Phronesis is indeed interlinked with practical aspects of moral growth in actions, as it 'involves ongoing selective and differential engagement with the world, not a repetition of a routine once learned and then safely relied on' (Annas, 2011, pp. 73–74). The understanding of phronesis in the model of a 'person of moral growth' is in line with Bernacchio's (2018) and Akrivou and Scalzo (2020) proposal, who argue for shifting away from a narrow understanding of phronesis as rational excellence oriented to self-protection, toward its association with the profoundly relational nature of human beings and a wider benevolent orientation. Havard's virtuous leadership theory (Havard, 2007, 2017) is also congruent with the model of a 'person of moral growth'. Virtuous leadership theory, which is rooted in Aristotelian and Christian virtue ethics tradition combining the four cardinal virtues in Aristotle with magnanimity and humility as important for leadership development, stresses that leaders grow in virtue precisely by caring for their followers' moral growth.

Some possible setbacks for the education of this component of a 'person of moral growth' can be mentioned: (1) *Tedious involvement*, i.e. just doing good things (e.g. studying, home chores, acts of service) in a boring, dull way, without a sense of meaning, which will not conduct to deeply enrooted habituation; (2) *'stiffened laboratory practising'*, i.e. a ritual attachment to the good individual practice itself (e.g. physical training, reading, acts of temperance and self-control), but separating the practice of virtues from the real-live relationships that give them meaning, and reducing virtue development to a technical process; and (3) *snobbish pride*, which, paraphrasing C. S. Lewis (1991) description of one of the dangers of friendship (p. 118), could be described as a sort of delight in belonging to socially recognized communities of moral growth and in knowing, and being known to know, morally distinguished people. This setback could lead to an unjustified complex of superiority which may push to exclude 'less virtuous people' from one's circle of acquaintances.

### **3.4. The moral growth identity component in moral education literature**

The understanding of the term 'moral growth identity' in the model of a 'person of moral growth' belongs to the realist personalism paradigm, which claims an ontological status for the person (Baker,

2002). The personalist philosopher Mounier (1936) stated that ‘my person is not the consciousness that I have of it’ (p. 51). For Flanagan (1991), whereas ‘represented identity’ is a construction, the ‘actual self’ is not; and for Kristjánsson (2010), ‘self-concept ... when it gets things right, has an actual self as its cognitive object: the referent to which it corresponds’ (p. 29).

This understanding differs quite radically from the moral identity construct of postmodern moral identity theory, in which moral identity is part of a subjectively constructed ‘self-theory’ (or ‘self-decision’) without reference to an actual moral self, and which assumes moral relativism, where the individual chooses autonomously a subjective understanding of happiness (as subjective well-being, self-enhancement, self-expansion, etc.) and the moral values leading to it. Instead, the moral growth identity of a person of moral growth leads her to strive for cultivating thoughts, feelings and behaviours leading to moral growth, and disposes the person to take advantage of situational factors that challenge virtue for growing in virtue, instead of looking for mere ‘retention of consistency’ between self-concept and thoughts, feelings and behaviour (Morgan & Fowers, 2022). In addition, the moral identity of a person of moral growth is formed by ‘watching’ emotionally at the actual person, instead of seeking for the ‘inner coordination of personal and moral goals’, as in the postmodern paradigm (Colby & Damon, 1993).

The emotional-reactive component of moral growth identity of the person of moral growth, described above, is related to what Kristjánsson (2008) called ‘the reactive attitudes the person experiences following the decision (to act or not to act) has been made’ (p. 75), which include self-conscious emotions, such as shame and guilt, linked with the spontaneous functioning of moral conscience.

As regards the relational dimension of moral growth identity, Gee (2000) has stressed the importance of the interaction with others within ‘affinity groups’ (p. 3) for developing the sense of self. ‘A social dimension is built into the very mechanism for forming self-conceptions; how others understand me is central to how I do and should understand myself’ (Kristjánsson, 2010, p. 48). Positive social recognition includes ‘good reputation’ and feedback and support from significant others: ‘Character virtues should be reinforced everywhere: on the playing fields, in classrooms, corridors, interactions between teachers and pupils, in assemblies, posters, head teacher messages and communications, staff training, and in relations with parents’ (The Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues, 2022, p. 12).

Among the possible setbacks for the development of this component, it should be noted that a realistic moral self-perception, including acceptance of our (moral) limits, can be endangered by self-deception, a ‘falsification of the memory’ (Pieper, 1965, pp. 14–15) in self and others. Not all that the person declares about oneself, or what is being declared about a person is what the person really is or seek, hence the personhood is not a logical addition of explicit identity self-understandings. Truthful friendships are extremely important in this regard (MacIntyre, 2019), because deep interpersonal communication is a necessary mechanism for nurturing a disposition of personal and mutual growth (Akrivou & Fernández González, 2021). Cultivating ‘perspective taking’ and associated relational responses (McHugh et al., 2004) especially helps toward higher levels of virtue associated with altruistic, prosocial and humility attitudes (Underwood & Moore, 1982).

A comparison of the model of a ‘person of moral growth’ with some of the influential models in moral education briefly described in the introduction may help highlight its integrative character and its originality. As regards the emotional-cognitive component of the model, in its emotional aspect it integrates the insights of Noddings (1984) care ethics model about the relevance of moral affect in morality and of Peterson’s and Seligman’s (2004) emphasis on cultivating positive emotions; and, in its cognitive aspect, the model integrates the main insight of Kohlberg’s (1981, 1984) cognitive moral development model, acknowledging that reason and cognition play an important role in the activation of the moral growth process, Turiel’s (1983) attention to how human beings reason about moral issues as central to moral development, and the concern of the Berlin wisdom project (Banicki, 2009) about wisdom as an intellectual virtue. The third component of the model (phronesis guided habituation) integrates the emphasis of neo-Aristotelian models (Kristjánsson, 2019; Sanderse, 2015) and of the Aretai model (Vaccarezza et al., 2023) on regular practice for enrooting virtue in the person. And the fourth – moral identity component of the model echoes the insight of Dewey’s (1909) empiricist model that the growth of consciousness about oneself and the others is a necessary pre-condition for moral development and echoes De Ruyter et al. (2022) insight on fostering a meaningful interpretation of relationships and activities for flourishing. As we have explained earlier, the model of a ‘person of moral growth’ also

integrates the relational aspect of moral development present in most of the other models; and flourishing is an implicit concern of the model, in which the explicit concern is the person, as we explained at the end of the introduction.

#### **4. Conclusion. A hindsight to the model of a 'person of moral growth'**

What mostly distinguishes the model of a 'person of moral growth' from other existing models of moral development is its emphasis on the person's free commitment to moral growth (2<sup>nd</sup> component), his/her deep orientation to interpersonal moral growth as a fundamental value. Also, the model of a 'person of moral growth' is distinguishable from other moral development models in that it is rooted in the personalist (anthropological and philosophical) understanding of the person. In the making of a person of moral growth the insights from different moral education approaches and models are integrated into a unifying system centred on the person.

Finally, it should be noted that the model of a 'person of moral growth' aspires to offer a universal basis in its conception and structure (components), while however being a personalist – and thus non universal – model in its concrete application. This is because the focus of the model is on each individual person, and the uniqueness of the person expresses itself and grows in different and very specific ways in his/her different dimensions, which does not support a standardised theory of moral growth. The guiding force of the moral growth process is the person itself in his/her unicity, freedom, dynamism, dialogical existence, and more importantly in his/her interiority. Accordingly, the components of the model (emotion-cognition, decision, practice, and identity), which are universal, receive their meaning from the person's dimensions they represent, which are unique for each person.

Therefore, the how and when the model will be implemented is defined by the person (in relation with other persons). This is why this model of moral growth is not a developmental (stage) one, whereby access to the next level depends on the mastery of the previous level. In contrast, the process of becoming a person of moral growth is rather cyclical, iterative, similar to the spiral processual model of musical development developed by Swanwick (1994), and is a deeply personal journey, and therefore each person can have different entrance points to it. The educator should be aware of unicity of the moral growth process of each person, and even of the changes of the person's moral growth paths in time. Different persons (and the same person at different points of time) can activate the components of the model with different intensity. Sometimes a rapid expansion of the cognitive-emotional image of a person of moral growth (1<sup>st</sup> component) happens, maybe due to new experiences or new personal acquaintances. The commitment to moral growth (2<sup>nd</sup> component) might be already strong at the beginning of the moral growth path, or it can be still made of fragile convictions and needing time and practice to be reaffirmed, sometimes even through profound moral crises leading to a more realistic self-understanding. The involvement in moral growth activities (3<sup>rd</sup> component) can experience phases of energy and exultation, for example when making new friends engaged in moral growth or encountering living communities of moral development, while sometimes it can be endangered by fatigue or distractions, e.g. with digital devices. Finally, as regards the making of a moral growth identity (4<sup>th</sup> component), for some persons self-satisfaction and the sensation to be 'doing the right thing' and awareness of one's progress could be in the foreground at the beginning of the moral growth path, while for others (or even for the same person later on) social recognition (positive feedback, external recognition of one's good deeds) could be more relevant.

This model of moral development based on personalist virtue ethics, is relevant to the ongoing dialogue in the virtue ethics character education literature. It offers a contribution to a more cogent moral education and will help to design and deliver moral educational experiences which address in a clear, convincing, and well-structured way each of the components of moral development in the service of personal moral growth. So far, empirically, the model of a 'person of moral growth' has been proved be useful for moral education and educational research in Latvia, where a questionnaire operationalizing the four components of this model was elaborated and used for research on pupils' moral growth since 2020. Reliability tests (based on 3500 questionnaires collected) provide evidence of the high levels of internal coherence of the model (Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.830$ ). This model was also used in the elaboration of a moral education curriculum and in its implementation as a moral education intervention in Latvia (100



classrooms, pupils from 5 to 19y/o). The model provided a useful structure for defining the curriculum learning outcomes and inspired the elaboration of the activities of the lesson plans. It will be convenient to test the validity the model in different empirical settings, both across different countries and educational systems, as part of a future research agenda.

The model is relevant not only for moral education, but for society as a whole, given the importance of a moral life for happiness. As the last United Nations 'World Happiness Report' states in its 'World happiness agenda for the next 10 years', the research priority number one should be on 'happiness and virtue': 'to complete the well-being revolution ... a first key issue is how to cultivate and promote virtuous character (...) if virtue matters so much, the key question is how to help people to become more virtuous' (Helliwell et al., 2023). And the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development report on values-education urges to 'ask ourselves about what it is to be a human' and 'support students to ... find a sense of purpose with their own moral compass' (OECD, 2021, Executive summary).

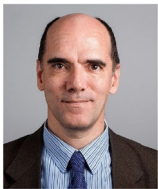
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