

Section: Philosophy of Education

Education and the Human Good

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What *kind of reasons* can be given for thinking that education is valuable? Many people conceive of the value of education in *instrumental* terms: it facilitates economic and social opportunities, confers status, promotes good citizenship, and the like. By contrast, philosophers have generally ascribed *intrinsic* value to education or learning in its various aspects: the learned or liberal arts, the process of learning those arts, and the state of self-improvement or excellence a person achieves through that process. Being educated is supposed to promote human *flourishing* or a condition of human development and activity that is both *admirable* and *satisfying*; it is supposed to contribute to people being *good* while being *good for* them. To defend views of this latter kind it is necessary to provide an account of the nature of education, an account of what is good in general or, more plausibly, good with respect to human beings, and an account of the relationships between education and what is good with respect to human beings. What is most delicate in this enterprise is grounding objective claims about what is good – claims about “the human good.” What *kind of reasons* will suffice?

I will offer the outline of an account of intrinsic value in education, grounded in a modestly perfectionist, non-teleological form of Aristotelianism. In doing this, I will draw on psychological research associated with self-determination theory (SDT) and its eudaimonistic account of well-being. The Aristotelian view of happiness, flourishing, or *eudaimonia* depends on the claim, a substantially *empirical* claim, that the virtuous exercise of human potentialities is what is most satisfying over the course of a life. The term “flourishing” expresses this claim by suggesting a fulfillment of potential that is deeply satisfying. If I am right, the reasons we can give for thinking education is intrinsically valuable are in part empirical and require recourse to psychological evidence. Eudaimonistic psychology is not a *substitute* for moral theory and educational philosophy, but it is arguably a valuable *resource* for philosophical inquiry in these domains.

Aristotle held, in a seminal formulation of the philosophical view of intrinsic value in education, that:

We should be able, not only to work well, but to use leisure well... But leisure of itself gives pleasure and happiness and enjoyment of life... *the pleasure of the best man is the best*, and springs from the noblest sources. It is clear then that *there are branches of learning and education which we must study merely with a view to leisure spent in intellectual activity, and these are to be valued for their own sake* (*Pol.* VIII.3 1337b3031; 1338a 1-2, 8-12; italics added).

Other passages suggest that what is intended is that the most *admirable* pleasures associated with the highest virtues are also the most *satisfying*. Note the claim that there are “branches of learning” that should be “valued for their own sake,” presumably because intellectual activity belonging to those branches of learning is, of all the possible uses of one’s leisure, the most admirable *and* the most satisfying. These branches of learning that are to be “valued for their own sake” are evidently “branches of knowledge” or domains essential to the exercise of theoretical wisdom or *sophia*, a flourishing life being one that makes intellectual activity in accordance with that highest virtue its highest end:

human good [*eudaimonia*] turns out to be activity of *psyche* [an active life of the psychic element that has a rational principle] in conformity with excellence, and if there are more than one excellence, in conformity with the best and most complete [evidently *sophia* or theoretical wisdom, which finds its completion in intellectual activity itself]... in a complete life (*NE* I.7 1098a16-18).

The view that emerges from these passages is that a liberal education or education in the branches of knowledge should be valued because it engages learners in intellectual activity that is inherently valuable and rewarding, activity that is the very stuff of human

flourishing or *eudaimonia*. Note that what has come together is a conception of the *nature* of education – a particular kind of education – and a conception of the *human good*, or flourishing, predicated on a *convergence* between what is *admirable* and what is *satisfying*.

A version of this Aristotelian view of education was advanced by Richard Peters (1965, 1973) and Paul Hirst (1965), with such success that it attained the status of a standard view associated with the early years of analytic philosophy of education. Peters, Hirst, and their intellectual allies developed the view that education, or liberal education, consists of *initiation into the forms of knowledge*. In *justifying* education, they located its value in the development of the mind as such, but they also invoked goods discernible from within the traditions of inquiry:

... a mind is the product of initiation into public traditions enshrined in a public language... [including] forms of knowledge... [Education] consists in initiating others into activities, modes of conduct and thought which have standards written into them by reference to which it is possible to act, think, and feel with varying degrees of skill, relevance and taste... The teacher, having himself been initiated, is on the inside of these activities and modes of thought and conduct. He understands vividly, perhaps, that some created objects are beautiful and others not; he can recognize the elegance of a proof, or a paragraph, the cogency of an argument, the clarity of an exposition, the wit of a remark, the neatness of a plot... (Peters, 1965: 63, 65).

This view was subjected to waves of criticism, and no successor view has emerged. Initiation into the forms of knowledge or inquiry is, above all, an implausibly narrow conception of what education is, and the exercise of intellectual virtue in pure inquiry is neither sufficient for a flourishing life – even by Aristotle’s lights – nor demonstrably necessary for a flourishing life. Hirst retracted aspects of the view, proposing (Hirst, 1993) that education should be regarded as *initiation into human practices*. There has been some discussion of this idea, leaning on Alastair MacIntyre’s

(1981) account of practices and the goods *internal to those practices* (Strike, 2003), and sometimes a fusion of MacIntyre and a reading of Wittgenstein inspired by Peter Winch (Smeyers & Burbules, 2006), but there has been little development of it.

Conceived as accounts of the nature and value of education, these views are limited by their reliance on the notion of goods *internal* to practices. MacIntyre argued in *After Virtue* (1981) that virtues are functionally defined with respect to tasks or roles, human virtues being so defined with respect to roles in the social practices of a community. Community membership being important to human well-being, MacIntyre supposed that *goodness in* human beings and what is *good for* human beings could be linked and grounded in this way in the idea of goods that are constructions of human practice; though he soon recognized the limitations of this strategy. Not all practices are functional with respect to human well-being, and some “goods” internal to practices should for that reason be regarded as not actually good. We need a way to distinguish good practices from bad practices, and it is hard to see how to do so except by reference to an independent account of human well-being and what promotes it.

The approach I will outline is a development of the idea that education essentially involves *initiation into human practices*, and it is broadly Aristotelian in the sense that it aims to vindicate the idea that education *can* directly promote students’ flourishing, where that entails a convergence between subjective well-being and an admirable fulfillment of human potentialities. Aristotle acknowledges a variety of human potentialities that can be exercised in more or less admirable and fulfilling ways, despite his unsupportable position that only lives devoted to the exercise of theoretical wisdom in pure inquiry and practical wisdom in the leadership of a society are happy lives. He attaches considerable importance to *social* potentialities that find their most admirable and satisfying fulfillment in relationships of mutual respect, mutual appreciation each other’s goodness, and readiness to act for each other’s good. Aristotle also recognizes that human beings have *productive* potentialities that can be developed and exercised more or less admirably and pleasantly in the competent practice of diverse and more or less intellectually demanding arts or *technai*. Because such arts make diverse contributions to a society’s functionality in enabling its members to live well, their

competent and *virtuous* exercise can, in a suitably arranged society, offer manifold opportunities for fulfilling social, as well as intellectual and productive, potentialities.

My formulation of what education is will be openly normative and a product of both normative arguments about what could be justified and descriptive content that is a reasonable match to some of the better things that occur in schools. The approach is framed by a version of the Rawlsian project that will take less for granted regarding the design of institutions, and that will appeal to general facts about the human condition revealed by science – facts allowed by Rawls to be admissible behind the veil of ignorance.

An account of the nature of education. Let us begin with a philosophical thought experiment. Suppose it is our job to specify the nature and purpose of society's basic institutions, and to do this in an impartial way. To try to ensure impartiality, let us suppose that we know only general truths about human existence, not our own individual attributes and circumstances or those of the people we happen to care about or represent. From behind this "veil of ignorance" what kind of society would we choose to live in? What would its institutions *exist for*? The answer I think we would converge on is that the institutions of society would exist to enable us all to live well – to live in ways that are good and that we perceive as good. Knowing that people must be enabled to develop in certain ways in order to live well, we would agree that these basic institutions would include *educational* ones, with the understanding that *educational institutions are inherently ones that promote forms of development conducive to living well*. We could distinguish *educational* institutions more fully by the fact that they promote such development by initiating learners into practices of a kind that *express human flourishing* – practices that cultivate forms of human potential in admirable and satisfying ways, consistent with the well-being of others. In doing this, we would observe that intellectual potential is developed in part through initiation into diverse modes and traditions of humanistic and scientific inquiry, while noting that intellectual potentials are not the only ones to be developed and traditions of inquiry are not the only practices whose mastery contributes to intellectual development. To say much more than this, we need an account of well-being and the relationship between its objective and subjective aspects – the relationship between what is admirable and what is satisfying.

An account of what is good with respect to human beings. I've noted that the idea of *flourishing* depends on the claim that the virtuous exercise of human potentialities is what is most satisfying and conducive to happiness or subjective well-being over the course of a life. I will assume, without argument, that there are basic intellectual virtues pertaining to epistemic reliability and practical reason, and virtues of common morality pertaining to respect for others; and I will assume – because human well-being is in many ways obviously dependent on social cooperation – that both kinds of virtues are foundational to efficacious agency and living well. The good with respect to human beings will be partly defined by these virtues. Further virtues or excellences arise in the context of specific human practices, including epistemic practices, provided those practices are themselves conducive to human well-being. I will understand conduciveness to human well-being to revolve around the satisfaction of basic, *universal needs* of human nature, the satisfaction of these needs being closely associated with the fulfillment of basic human potentials and essential to happiness or subjective well-being. Some of these needs are psychological.

Self-determination theory (SDT) is currently the only systematic view in social psychology that adapts an organismic perspective on human nature, agency, and well-being. Developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, it posits three innate, *universal psychological needs* closely associated with the satisfaction of human potentials and natural inclination toward action, exploration and learning, psychic integration, and social membership: the *need for competence* or efficacy; the *need for autonomy* or the experience of self-directedness congruent with one's values, needs, and sense of self; and the *need for relatedness* or the experience of mutually affirming interpersonal connection. The fulfillment of these needs has been investigated over the course of three decades in connection with motivation, internalization of norms, well-being, and the bearing of social contexts on all of these. One of the central findings that has been replicated transculturally, by research teams in a variety of countries, is that the satisfaction of all three of these basic psychological needs is essential to reported well-being or happiness and to related measures of psychological well-being, such as *vitality* (a sense of psychological and physical energy), *meaning* (a sense of purpose), and the absence of physical symptoms of stress and psychic conflict. This has been found to be true, whatever value

research subjects and their cultures do or don't place on the need in question. There is thus reason to regard these needs as universal requirements of human well-being grounded in human nature, and to regard their satisfaction and the related fulfillment of human cognitive, social, and productive potentials in accordance with norms of competence and merit as central to human flourishing (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryan, Huta & Deci, 2008; Ryan, Curren & Deci, forthcoming). While there are many ways to produce short-term positive affect, the research indicates that enduring satisfaction, *satisfaction over the course of a life*, is associated with fulfilling human potentialities well in self-directed, competent activity and good relationships. Let this suffice, for the present, as vindication of a relaxed version of the Aristotelian axiom that the key to happiness is the exercise of human potentials in accordance with virtue.

Education and the human good. I have said that educational institutions promote forms of development conducive to living well, and that they do this by initiating learners into practices that *express human flourishing*. To say that these practices express human flourishing can now be explained. The practices in question must be ones through which learners can fulfill diverse human potentials and satisfy basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. To say that the practices *express* human flourishing is to say that they give scope and expression to human potentials exercised in accordance with forms of excellence and moral and ethical requirements. Diverse practices, from reading and writing to the creative and productive arts and discipline-based forms of critical inquiry, provide opportunities to find satisfaction in the development and expression of human potentials. The writing of poetry is one example of a human practice, and initiation into the practice of writing poetry involves the exercise and development of a cluster of human potentials – potentials whose exercise and development may be more or less rewarding and self-sustaining, depending on the individual. We can assume that an education essentially involves initiation into a plurality of such practices that will provide opportunities to experience competence, facilitate sociability and relationships of mutual regard, and cultivate the judgment, self-awareness, and habits of self-examination essential to managing our lives competently.

Constraints of justice require that this be framed as a provision of meaningful opportunities to engage and develop mastery in admirable domains of human practice,

including practices of inquiry and critical reason, without pressure to adopt, abandon, or revise any specific conception of the good within the reasonable plurality of such conceptions. It nevertheless identifies a robust role for public schools in promoting human flourishing, not only in providing diverse opportunities but in nurturing forms of development we have reason to regard as basic to living well in any cultural setting and in providing for the satisfaction of *basic, universal needs of human nature*, including the need to experience *competence* or efficacy in challenging, self-directed activities. The worthiness of such activities to be taught in schools would be defined partly with respect to providing scope for satisfying fulfillment of potentialities, and partly with respect to the contributions of the practices to a society's capacity to enable everyone in it to live well (i.e., the society's capacity to provide social, civic, material necessities, etc.). A system of education conducive to well-being will not ignore the requirements of work and citizenship, but the view I am outlining would evaluate all institutions, including schools, for their inherent contributions to well-being, not just their instrumental contributions.

All of this speaks to the intrinsic value of education's *outcome*. I should note, in conclusion, that the intrinsic value and efficacy of the *process* of education depends substantially on the quality of the relationships, challenges, and autonomy support involved (Ryan & Niemiec, 2009). Education is a process of initiation, and ongoing fulfillment of needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy allow it to succeed by encouraging the learner along a path of flourishing.

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