

What Has Athens To Do With Chicago?

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In “Dewey, Aristotle, and Education as Completion,” William Cochran attempts to offer a way past the longstanding stalemate between traditionalist and progressivist approaches to education. Borrowing from John Dewey’s *Experience and Education*, he suggests that we can most helpfully understand this divide in terms of two views of education: traditionalists see education as formation, while progressivists see education as development. He then turns to Aristotle, arguing that his conception of education-as-completion combines elements of *both* education-as-formation *and* education-as-development. Although I am sympathetic to this goal, I would argue that the divide between these two approaches to education goes deeper than the author acknowledges. Thus, the problem of finding an approach that combines them is more difficult than it seems.

In order to determine whether Aristotelian education-as-completion successfully combines the benefits of both education-as-formation and education-as-development, while avoiding the costs of each, we need to understand those benefits and costs. In this paper, the particular strengths of traditionalist education are not clear. The author briefly notes the “demonstrated success”¹ of traditionalism: many apparently flourishing charter schools exhibit a strict and authoritarian pedagogy, and many graduates of those schools enroll in college (though comparatively few graduate). This is only surface-level evidence for the benefits of education-as-formation: if we look past college *enrollment* to college *graduation*, and if we define educational success in more holistic terms than test scores, does traditionalism still look worthwhile? After these introductory remarks on traditionalism in charter schools, there is no further treatment of the supposed benefits of education-as-formation; instead, those benefits are merely assumed when the author argues that education-as-completion offers us the best of education-as-formation without the drawbacks. But, lacking a more fully developed view of exactly what *is* good in education-as-formation,

we are not in a position to evaluate Aristotle's alternative, much less to know why we should care.

The author develops the costs of traditionalist education more clearly than its benefits. Following Dewey, he identifies the problem with education-as-formation as insufficient attention to and care for the individuality of students. Rather than being allowed to develop in their own ways, students are expected to "contort themselves in various unnatural ways to absorb ideas and adopt behaviors that are not their own."² We can infer the benefits and costs of progressivism from those of traditionalism. The main benefit of education-as-development is that it seeks the present good of individual students, rather than expecting them to live up to externally-imposed, adult-oriented standards. The cost, then, must be that it is not as objectively successful as education-as-formation; but once again, this paper offers neither evidence for this claim nor the criteria for evaluating it.

Determining the costs and benefits of education-as-formation and education-as-development is made more difficult by the fact that these terms can refer to either the methods or the goals of education. This is a problem not only for this paper, but also for the whole of Dewey's *Experience and Education*, from which the author derives the distinction. For Dewey, traditional education refers sometimes to *methods* that depend upon external control and enforced conformity, and sometimes to an overemphasis on the *goal* of preserving the past; similarly, progressive education refers sometimes to *methods* that attend to the individual natures and experiences of the students, and sometimes to the *goal* of increasing opportunities for growth and experience in the present. We might not see a need to distinguish between educational methods and educational goals; after all, don't our methods tend to fit our goals? But we can easily imagine counterexamples. Consider, for instance, a homeschooling parent teaching her children the great achievements of the past, or a private music instructor preparing his students for a very strict examination. These teachers might use highly individualized *methods*, based on the specific needs and abilities of the students in front of them. But Dewey would say that their *goals* are still predetermined and external to the students.

The opposite combination — traditionalist methods and progressivist goals — is equally possible. In fact, the author argues that education-as-completion uses the *methods* of education-as-formation to achieve the *ends* of education-as-development. How can this be? Crucially, Aristotelian education-as-completion involves bringing students' *natural* capacities to their *natural* fulfillment. In other words, Aristotle believes that human beings have an innate, universal nature, and that it is possible for that nature to be more or less realized. Education-as-completion involves bringing the nature that students *already have* to its fullest realization. In fact, the pedagogical methods of education-as-completion are not always wholly traditionalist; for instance, an Aristotelian teacher will still use students' prior knowledge to lead them to new knowledge. Nor are its goals entirely progressivist: it expects students to acquire a predetermined set of habits. But, the author argues, this requirement is acceptable because these are exactly the habits that students are most suited to *by nature*, the ones they most need in order to live good human lives.

So Aristotle's conception of education rests upon his conception of human nature; his pedagogy presupposes his metaphysics. But far from solving the impasse between traditionalism and progressivism, pointing to innate human nature merely opens up a new question. For what progressivists reject is precisely the idea that we can base our educational expectations on a universal nature that all humans possess! We see this particularly clearly in Dewey's critique of education-as-unfolding, which the author discusses toward the end of the paper. In education-as-unfolding, "[d]evelopment is conceived not as continuous growing, but as the unfolding of latent powers toward a definite goal. The goal is conceived of as completion, perfection. Life at any stage short of attainment of this goal is merely an unfolding toward it."³ Dewey considers this entirely the wrong way to view growth: though education-as-unfolding uses the language of process, it continues to focus on "the completed product;"⁴ just as in other problematic approaches to education, "the adult environment is accepted as a standard for the child."⁵

Is not this charge also applicable to Aristotelian education-as-completion? The author asserts, "Aristotle has the resources to respond to this criticism in

his discussion of nature and growth.”⁶ He argues that for Aristotle, growth is always growth *of a particular kind of thing*—a nature—and thus growth always implies a direction. Yet the nature towards which each thing grows is neither indefinite nor stuck in the future, but is “defined by the nature of the natural thing” and “immanent though as yet incomplete in the developing thing itself.”⁷ Once again, the concept of innate human nature *seems* to offer a way forward. Yet once again, simply pointing to human nature does not solve the argument, but merely asserts a particular position within it.

Dewey is no stranger to the argument that “‘growth’ is not enough; we must also specify the direction in which growth takes place, the end towards which it tends.”⁸ Even so, he resists the claim that growth must be evaluated by any criterion other than itself:

from the standpoint of growth as education and education as growth the question is whether growth in this direction promotes or retards growth in general.... when and *only* when development in a particular line conduces to continuing growth does it answer to the criterion of education as growing.⁹

One might argue that Dewey does have criteria in mind (such as “sociability” and “intelligence”) that cannot be wholly captured by the concept of ‘growth.’ For instance, later in the same work he says, “Everything then depends, so far as education is concerned, upon what is done with this added liberty,”¹⁰ and he calls “the scientific organization of knowledge” found in adults and specialists “the goal toward which education should continually move.”¹¹ But my intent here is not to discuss the (in)consistencies of Dewey’s growth-criterion. Rather, I merely wish to emphasize that pointing to human nature does not solve the impasse between education-as-formation and education-as-development; rather, these views of education differ *precisely* in their respective conceptions of human nature.

In conclusion, I have suggested that the root of the disagreement between traditional and progressive education lies in their differing attitudes

toward human nature. Examining the question of whether humans have an innate, universal nature, and what that nature may be¹², will help bring greater clarity to our educational goals and, in turn, the methods by which we can best achieve those goals. I do not claim that we will agree on the specifics of human nature easily, or even at all. But no good is served by pretending these disagreements do not exist. Contrary to the position of this paper, “nature” is not an answer; it is its own question.

1 William Cochran, “Dewey, Aristotle, and Education as Completion,” in *Philosophy and Education Society 2018*, ed. Megan Laverty (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2019).

2 Ibid.

3 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 53–54.

4 Ibid., 55.

5 Ibid., 49.

6 Cochran, “Dewey, Aristotle, and Education as Completion.”

7 Ibid.

8 John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1938), 36.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 61. In this quote, Dewey is referring to mere freedom of physical movement, which he says cannot be treated as an end in itself but must be seen as a means to the greater goals of purposive action and social cooperation (63–64). But see also Charles Taylor’s rejoinder to Isaiah Berlin, “What’s Wrong with Negative Liberty,” in *The Idea of Freedom*, ed. A. Ryan (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), 177–193.

11 Ibid., 83.

12 For two different neo-Aristotelian conceptions of human nature see Christian Smith, *To Flourish or Destruct* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), and Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).