Dewey, Aristotle, and Education as Completion

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INTRODUCTION: "TWO SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT"[1]

Two schools of thought have governed pedagogical thinking for almost one hundred years: traditionalism and progressivism. Traditionalism generally aims at instilling old knowledge in young minds—a transmission process best facilitated by enforcing strict rules of conduct for all students to follow uniformly. Progressivism, by contrast, generally aims at the gradual development of each individual student through project work and the construction of certain environments designed to enable students themselves to have direct experiences of what is to be learned.

Even though the debate between these approaches is old, it is still ongoing. One of the main issues is the apparent harshness—but also the demonstrated success—of the traditional model's methods. A recent article in *The New Yorker*, for example, in which the author immersed herself in one of New York's most traditionalist-oriented charter school systems, used some choice words to describe that school system's climate: "highly controlled", "repressive", "tense", "oppressive", and "excessively punitive."[2] Yet this same article also mentions two further points of interest. First: "many charter schools that have flourished in cities in the past two decades are extremely traditional in their approach; teachers emphasize direct instruction, drilling, and test prep, and enforce strict codes of discipline."[3] Second: "Although charter students are admitted to college at higher rates than students from comparable public schools, their graduation rates are dispiritingly low. Seventy per cent of charter-school students who enroll in college fail to complete their degrees within six years."[4] While traditionalist schools seem to help students develop the discipline and learning required to get into college, they do not seem to help them flourish on their own once they get there.

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Faced with this state of affairs, some traditionalist educators are recognizing the need to combine elements of *both* traditional *and* progressive models of education. The problem is that these two models do not mix well, at least according to two of the educators interviewed:

> "It's very challenging to have a kind of data-driven performance-oriented culture, and to do progressive pedagogy … These things don't naturally, or easily, go together."[5]
>
> "College graduation was always the goal … But only now … do I think we are seriously thinking about what the pedagogy should be *through* the years."
>
> How can a highly supervised child be transformed into an independent learner? Do you allow students the freedom to fail, or do you continue to provide constant hand-holding?
>
> "It's an incredible design tension."[6]

In order to contribute to the ongoing efforts to find a way through this impasse, I examine the conceptions of education that underlie traditionalism and progressivism. To do so, I enlist the help of John Dewey, who ties traditionalism to *education as formation* and progressivism to *education as development*. I then try to show that the divide between these two conceptions of education rests upon a false dichotomy. Aristotle presents us with a theory of education that combines aspects of *both* formation *and* development, and so perhaps his model of education, which I call *education as completion*, can provide us with a way to think about how to successfully combine aspects of traditionalism and progressivism in schools today.

While my discussion here will necessarily be sketchy and incomplete, I will be content to provide an analysis of the key philosophical ideas underlying the tension between traditionalism and progressivism and propose a resolution of this tension by explaining how Aristotle's theory of education as completion incorporates elements of both schools of thought.[7] If I can demonstrate that Aristotle's education as completion is a genuine combination of these two

views, that will be enough for a start. The further task will be to spell out how this kind of education could take shape in today's schools, but I leave that work for another time.

DEWEY AND EDUCATION AS FORMATION

Near the beginning of his *Experience and Education*, Dewey connects traditionalism and progressivism to two more general approaches to education:

> The history of educational theory is marked by the opposition between the idea that education is development from within and that it is formation from without; that it is based upon natural endowments and that education is a process of overcoming natural inclination and substituting in its place habits acquired under external pressure. At present, the opposition so far as practical affairs of the school are concerned, tends to take the form of a contrast between traditional and progressive education.[8]

Traditionalism, therefore, is the current instantiation of a more general way of thinking about education: *education as formation*, which views education as a process of impressing external standards on students in order to supplant their natural inclinations with prescribed standard behaviors. Progressivism, conversely, is aligned with *education as development*, which views education as a process of cultivating the native natural talents of individual students.

This schematization of the history of educational theory is generally quite helpful, for it succinctly captures the two different stances that have historically been taken towards education. However, this way of understanding the history of educational thought also has the potential to establish a false dichotomy. For it is possible to hold a view on which education is *both* a process of formation *and* development. This, I argue below, is Aristotle's way of thinking about education as completion. But before outlining Aristotle's view, it will be useful to articulate the problems facing education as formation, since education as completion seeks to incorporate similar methods into its

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practice. With the problems of education as formation in view, we can know what obstacles a theory of education as completion will need to overcome.

Dewey's criticism of the traditional model is twofold: (1) it treats students as the mere means to transmitting and preserving the knowledge and codes of conduct of the past; and (2) this transmission process injures students' individuality (or, though this is not Dewey's language, we might say their *autonomy*) by forcing them to contort themselves in various unnatural ways to absorb ideas and adopt behaviors that are not their own.[9]

Education as formation, therefore, mistakenly values the wrong thing: instead of valuing the individual student (as it ought), it *uses* the student as a mere means to attain what it mistakenly believes is truly valuable—the preservation of some collective past. According to Dewey:

> The subject-matter of education [as formation] consists of bodies of information and of skills that have been worked out in the past; therefore, *the chief business of the school* is to transmit them to the new generation. In the past, there have also been developed standards and rules of conduct; moral training consists in forming habits of action in conformity with these rules and standards.[10]

The aim of this model also dictates the way students are made to behave in school: "Since the subject-matter as well as standards of proper conduct are handed down from the past, the attitude of pupils must, upon the whole, be one of docility, receptivity, and obedience."[11] Because the goal is the transmission of past knowledge, students are required to develop characteristics that turn them into good receptacles of that knowledge in order to facilitate the transmission process.

Here, I think, we can begin to see what seems so problematic about viewing education as a process of formation. As Dewey puts it:

> The traditional scheme is, in essence, one of *imposition from above and from outside*. It imposes adult standards, subject matter, and methods upon those who are only growing

> slowly toward maturity. The gap is so great that the required subject-matter, the methods of learning and of behaving are foreign to the existing capacities of the young. They are beyond the reach of the experience the young learners already possess. Consequently, they must be imposed; even though good teachers will use devices of art to cover up the imposition so as to relieve it of its *obviously brutal features*.[12]

Recall here how the climate of the New York charter school system was described in much the same terms—as "oppressive," "repressive," etc. Dewey, however, explains what makes these practices objectionable: education as formation is really *education as imposition,* for it imposes adult standards on students who are "only growing slowly toward maturity." In doing so, it curtails and constrains the student's natural development in seriously objectionable ways.

By imposing adult content and codes of conduct on students, education as formation forces students to become something other than what they truly are, or at least would be, if only their development were guided properly.[13] In order for Aristotle's education as completion to avoid these objections, therefore, it must be shown that it concerns itself with well-being of the students themselves, rather than the preservation of some subject matter or code of ethics, and that it pays attention to capabilities that students have at each stage of their education. But in order to provide us with a way to think through the impasse discussed in the introduction, education as completion must also successfully incorporate elements of education as formation.

ARISTOTLE AND EDUCATION AS COMPLETION

For Aristotle, education is a process of taking the capacities that belong to the human being by nature and bringing them to completion. On this view, education involves methods of *formation*, but these methods are put to use in the service of completing the *development* of the child into a fully-formed and well-functioning adult—which is something children have the

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potential to become by nature. If in the following section it can be established that Aristotle combines these two approaches successfully in one view, then a fuller articulation of his theory of education as completion may prove fruitful for finding a way through the impasse mentioned in the introduction.

Aristotle's way of thinking about education as completion can be gleaned from noting the following six points, taken from different parts of his corpus:

1. Each thing is completed well when it functions in accordance with the virtue that properly belongs to it (*NE* I.7 1098a15).[14]

2. A thing is said to be complete when it possesses the virtue(s) properly belonging to it, because then it is most in accord with its nature (*Phys*. VII.3 246a12-15).

3. Nature is an end (*telos*), since something's nature is the character it has when its coming into being is complete (*Pol*. I.2 1252b32-34).

4. The function of a human being is activity of the soul and actions that involve reason (*NE* I.7 1098a12-14).

5. It is characteristic of a good human being to do these things (actualize reason in thought and in action) well (*NE* I.7 1098a14-15).

6. The good of a thing consists in the excellent performance of its function (*NE* I.7 1097b26-28).

Education as completion, then, is the process by which humans are instilled with the virtues they need in order to realize their nature, perform their function well, and thereby lead a flourishing life. Education as completion does not aim at making students into something other than what they truly are, but instead uses methods of formation to help them realize the capacity they have to become what they *already essentially are by nature*, but while in the process of being educated are only in an undeveloped, incomplete way.

The methods Aristotle prescribes in order to bring about the completion of the human being are necessarily formational, because there are parts of us that require the presence of the virtues in order to be complete. According to Aristotle, the human soul is comprised, roughly speaking, of two parts that need the virtues in order to be completed: a rational part and a non-rational part that can still listen to reason (*NE* I.13). Each of these parts has its own corresponding virtue, and the virtue of each of these parts is developed by its own method of education:

> Since virtue, then, is twofold, of thought on the one hand, and of character on the other, while that of thought has both its generation and development mostly from teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), that of character comes about from habits (*NE* II.1 1103a14-17).

For Aristotle, habituation is essentially the externally guided repetition of certain sanctioned actions. A moral learner is made to do these actions in order to develop the appropriate pleasures that attend doing noble actions, and feel pain at doing shameful ones (*NE* I.3 1095a4-11, II.1 1103a14-17, X.9 1179b21-30; *Pol.* VII.13 1332b8-11, VII.15 1334b21-28, VIII.3 1338b4-8).[15] Aristotle's thought is that since we naturally tend toward actions that we find pleasurable and avoid actions that we find painful, it is the educator's task to instill in us from an early age pleasures and pains of the appropriate sort. Actions and feelings will be appropriate when they are conducive to bringing about our rational nature: "reason and intelligence are the end of our nature. Therefore it is by reference to them that one must concern oneself with birth and the development of habits" (*Pol.* VII.15 1334b14-17).[16]

But since the non-rational part of the soul develops before the rational part (*Pol.* VII.15 1334b21-27 & VIII.3 1338b4-8), the habituation process must occur at a time before children have the ability to think rationally. This program of habituation appears obviously objectionable, since its overt aim is to manipulate the attitudes of children in order to get them to adopt certain preferences and dispreferences before they can think for themselves. Aristotle's response, in brief, is that just because these methods are formational does not

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mean they are not natural. According to Aristotle, "in some cases what is due to nature is a dual tendency, moving to the bad or the good because of one's habits" (*Pol.* VII.13 1332b2-3).[17] The non-rational part of our soul that can listen to reason is able to go in either direction: either towards the good or towards the bad. By instilling the virtues of character, the educator makes sure they tend toward the good: "Hence the virtues come about in us neither by nature nor against nature, rather *we are naturally receptive of them* and we are brought to completion through habit" (*NE* II.1 1103a24-26).[18]

Teaching, the method of education devoted to developing the virtues of thought that belong to the rational part of the soul, initially seems objectionable, too, for it shares many of the features of education as formation that Dewey criticized above. Perhaps worst of all, Aristotle also places a number of pre-requisites on students that seem designed precisely in order to make them good receptacles of a teacher's teaching, in much the same way that education as formation requires docility, receptivity, and obedience in its students: Aristotle's students must be able to listen and remember what they have heard (*Met.* I.1 980b21-25), they must already know something of what they are to be taught (*APo.* I.1 71a1-16; *Met.* IX.8 1049b30-1050a1; *NE* II.1 1103a14-17), and they must already be "well-educated" in how to receive arguments (*PA* I.1 639a1-12; *NE* I.3 1094b19-1095a4; *Met.* II.3 994b31-995a20; *EE* I.6 1217a7-10).

Yet one of Aristotle's seemingly objectionable pre-requisites for teaching is actually one of the best features of his account. Students must already know some aspect of what they are to be taught, because otherwise learning—as Aristotle recognizes—is impossible: "if you did not know whether there was such-and-such a thing *simpliciter*, how could you have known that it had two right angles *simpliciter*?" (*APo.* I.1 71a27-28).[19] His point is that students must already have some sense of what the teacher is talking about if the teacher's teaching is going to be effective. But this prior knowledge requirement cuts the other way, too: a teacher must be sensitive to the capabilities and the experience of her students before she tries to teach them something new. It is only by gradually building upon the knowledge students

already have that a teacher develops a student's knowledge of the truth and thereby both generates and develops her students' intellectual virtues.

So, education as completion uses methods of formation in order to instill habits and knowledge in students. But it does so in order to develop the virtues in them that they require in order to become complete human beings—in order to become, that is, capable of the kind of rational activity in accordance with virtue that they are especially well suited to do because of their nature. Rather than impose upon students something other than what they truly are, education as completion seeks to develop students into that which they already are, but are in an incomplete way. To do so, it uses methods of formation, because the human being, while not naturally virtuous, is naturally receptive of the virtues. Finally, the aim of education as completion is not the transmission of knowledge and morals of the past, but is instead the flourishing of the student. Education as completion may instill prescribed knowledge and habits in students, but it does so in order to enable them to live a flourishing human life.

DEWEY AND EDUCATION AS UNFOLDING

At this point it will be useful to consider Dewey's critique of another kind of education—*education as unfolding*—since distinguishing it from education as completion will help sharpen the picture just drawn of Aristotle's theory. According to Dewey, education as unfolding:

> professes to be based upon the idea of development. But it takes back with one hand what it proffers with the other. Development 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.[20]

Though Dewey himself does not mention Aristotle among the philosophers he associates with this view, it should be clear that Aristotle's

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education as completion is susceptible to the same kind of critique that Dewey articulates here. Growth is the key concept on which this criticism turns, and Dewey's main claim is that education as unfolding is the wrong way of thinking about it:

> The conception that growth and progress are just approximations to a final unchanging goal is the last infirmity of the mind in its transition from a static to a dynamic understanding of life. It simulates the style of the latter. It pays tribute of speaking much of development, process, progress. But all of these operations are conceived to be merely transitional; they lack meaning on their own account. They possess significance only as movements *toward* something away from what is now going on. Since growth is just a movement toward a completed being, the final ideal is immobile. An abstract and indefinite future is in control with all which that connotes in depreciation of present power and opportunity.[21]

While education as unfolding seems to take a developmentalist approach, its true aim is some "abstract and indefinite future," which is in control of the present. This makes education as unfolding into just another objectionable version of education as formation—or worse, as imposition.

I think Aristotle has the resources to respond to this criticism in his discussion of nature and growth. When Aristotle examines the natural world in *Physics* II, he first determines what it is that distinguishes natural from non-natural things. His answer is that a natural thing "has within itself a principle of motion and stability in place, in growth and decay, or in alteration" (*Phys.* II.1 192b15-16).[22] Then, recalling his theory of hylomorphism, Aristotle asks: where is the nature of the natural thing located—in its matter or its form? After considering each option, Aristotle concludes that the nature is *more* in the form of the natural thing than in its matter. He reaches this conclusion in part because of a reflection upon growth:

> [W]hat is growing, insofar as it is growing, proceeds from something toward something <else>. What is it, then, that grows? Not what it is growing *from*, but what it is growing *into*. Therefore, the shape [= form] (*morphe*) is the nature (*Phys.* II.1 193b17-19).[23]

Aristotle's point here is that in order to understand growth, we need to know what grows, and when we reflect upon growth, we necessarily refer to the direction in which something is growing, and the direction in which a natural thing grows is towards the realization—*i.e.*, the completion—of its form (*cf. GC* I.5 321a29-322a4 & 322a28-33).

Therefore, while it is true that education as completion seeks to move the developing human being towards the realization of a form that they do not yet possess completely, it is not quite right to call this completed form merely "an abstract and indefinite future." While in development the form may not be realizable except at some point in the future, the form is not *indefinite*—rather it is defined by the nature of the natural thing. Nor is the form in the future *only*—rather it is immanent though as yet incomplete in the developing thing itself. It is present as the direction towards which the growing thing moves by nature.

Applying this reflection on growth to education as completion, then, we get the following picture: the nature of the human being, though as yet undeveloped and incomplete while in the process of development, is still present within the human being as the incomplete realization of that which the human being is in the process of becoming. Since nature alone cannot complete the human form, it falls to education to complete this task, "for every craft and education seeks to fill what nature has left out" (*Pol.* VII.17 1337a1-2).

CONCLUSION

I hope to have shown that Aristotle's education as completion successfully combines elements of education as formation and as development.

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For if it does, then perhaps it can offer us a way to combine traditionalism and progressivism in order to address the impasse facing educators today that we noted in the introduction. If successful, this picture of education as completion may also serve as the starting-point for a further discussion about how to implement this kind of education in schools. In a gesture towards realizing that implementation process, I conclude with a couple of remarks on some relevant quotations from Aristotle.

(1) "All humans by nature desire to know" (*Met.* I.1 980a21). Aristotle thinks there is something all human beings share, simply because of our nature: a desire to know. Since education as completion aims at bringing about the completion of what the human being is by nature, it should also therefore preserve and cultivate this innate human curiosity.

(2) "Further, particularized education is actually superior to communal education, just as in the case of medicine" (*NE* X.9 1180b6-7).[24] One of the potential problems education as completion faces is that it can seem excessively universal. While Aristotle thinks public education is necessary (*Pol.* VIII.1), he also maintains that a particularized education is not only possible, but perhaps even preferable: "It would seem, then, that a particular case is treated with more exactness when there is individual supervision, since each person is more likely to get what suits him. But the best supervision in each particular case will be provided by the doctor, athletic trainer, or whoever else has knowledge of the universal and knows what applies in all cases or in these sorts (since the sciences are said to be—and actually are—of what is common)" (1180b13-15).[25] In order to best bring about the flourishing of each student, a knowledge of the universal human form *and* of the particular student is required.

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1 The title of this section is from a recent article in *The New Yorker* by Rebecca Mead, "Two Schools of Thought: Success Academy's quest to combine rigid discipline with a progressive curriculum," *The New Yorker* (December 11, 2017): 34–41. My thanks go to Richard Kraut for pointing this article out to me, and for his insightful discussion of a previous draft of this article. My many thanks also go to my fellow participants in the graduate student dissertation writing workshop at Northwestern

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2 Mead, "Two Schools," 37–38

3 Ibid., 37.

4 Ibid., 40.

5 Ibid., 39.

6 Ibid., 40.

7 For two more complete accounts of Aristotle's views on education, see C.D.C. Reeve, "Aristotelian Education," in *Philosophers on Education: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. A.O. Rorty (London: Routledge, 1998), 51–65, and William Frankena, *Three Historical Philosophies of Education: Aristotle, Kant, Dewey* (Atlanta: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1965), 15–78.

8 John Dewey, *Experience & Education* (New York: The Free Press, 2015), 17. First published in 1938.

9 Though Dewey nowhere specifies the exact relationship between education as formation and traditionalism, I take it that they are virtually synonymous, and I treat them as such in what follows.

10 Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 17 (emphasis added).

11 Ibid., 18.

12 Ibid., 18–19 (emphasis added).

13 Dewey himself, of course, has much to say about the way to guide students. I do not intend to criticize or contend with his position here. Instead, I use his critique of traditionalism to elicit the objections that a theory of education that seeks to use methods of formation must overcome.

14 All references to Aristotle's works occur as in-text citations. Translations of Aristotle are mine unless otherwise noted. Abbreviations of the works cited correspond to those used in Terence Irwin and Gail Fine, *Aristotle: Selections* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1995), xi.

15 For the most recent take on this aspect of Aristotle's theory of moral education, which includes a helpful overview of the many different interpretations on offer, see Marta Jiminez, "Aristotle on Becoming Virtuous by Doing Virtuous Actions," *Phronesis* 61 (2016): 3–32.

16 Aristotle, *Politics Books VII and VIII*, trans. Richard Kraut (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 28–29.

17 Trans., Kraut.

18 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* trans. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2015), 21 (emphasis added).

19 Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics,* trans. Jonathan Barnes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 1.

20 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1944), 56.

21 Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 56–57.

22 Trans., Irwin and Fine.

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23 Trans., Irwin and Fine.
24 Trans., Reeve.
25 Ibid.