CLASSICAL EDUCATION AND HUMAN HAPPINESS

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Aristotle stands in between two giants of history: his teacher, Plato, and his student, Alexander the Great. As both a student of a great teacher and a teacher of a great leader, Aristotle's insights and understanding of education deserve our attention. Though there is no work on "education" in the received writings of Aristotle, the topic comes up sporadically throughout his writings. Rather than pulling together these various comments, I will explore the *ends* of education based on Aristotle's theory of means and ends in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Today there are several strains of educational theory which each offer their own views on the means and ends of education. So, just what might Aristotle have to say about these theories?

In Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle begins his discussion of ethics with the observation that whenever a person acts, they always act with some end in mind, some purpose, goal, or good. Further, he observes that the ends we have in mind are mostly means to other ends. For example, I brush my teeth. This is not done, however, without purpose. Clearly there is a good I have in mind for the action, for otherwise I would not brush my teeth. People may brush their teeth with different goods in mind. For example, one person may do it in order to avoid gingivitis, others to have a "clean" feeling in their mouths. Either way, the end in mind is a means to another end. In the former case the end is health and in the later it is pleasure.

Aristotle links the chain of means and ends and asks, is there something towards which all actions aim?[1] That is, is there a "last end" or a "highest good" that we have in mind when we act? Aristotle asserts that the end we all have in mind is "happiness."[2] That is, whatever we do, we do because we think it will make us happy. All people, says Aristotle, agree on this, but that is as far as the agreement goes. Just what is meant by "happiness" is highly disputed. Some might say that happiness is found in wealth, some that it is found in pleasure, others that it is found in honors. Is there any way to settle this dispute? Aristotle thinks so.

The question of "what is human flourishing or human happiness" must be defined in terms of what it means "to be human." For, to find the "good" of anything, we must know its function. For example, the good of the computer rests in its functioning as it was designed to function (compute) and it reaches its "good" when it functions (computes) according to the way it was designed to function. The guitarist is a "good" guitarist when he plays the guitar in the way it was designed to function. So, if a human being has a function, the human being's ultimate "good" will be functioning according to its nature (i.e., we will find fulfillment—our good—

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when we function according to our essence). Yet, how might we determine the human function?[3]

To determine an object's function one needs to discover what distinguishes it from all other objects. What is it that makes it, it? What is it, within humans, which makes them "human" and not "whales" or something else? Aristotle claims that the human function is "the soul's activity that expresses reason [as itself having reason] or requires reason [as obeying reason]."[4] That is, it is the ability to think or to know that is unique and the principle element that makes a human, a human. However, it is not merely "thinking" but rather reasoning and acting in accordance with reason. Furthermore, it is not just thinking and acting, but thinking and acting well; that is, excellently or virtuously. Aristotle concludes, "Each function is completed well when its completion expresses the proper virtue. Therefore the human good turns out to be the soul's activity that expresses virtue."[5] Happiness, therefore, "is an activity of the soul expressing complete virtue."[6]

So, what has all of this to do with education? Education itself is an action and therefore may be analyzed with regards to its means and ends. The central dispute in contention is two different theories as to the end of education, and how these relate to the end of human "happiness."[7]

On the "progressivist" view of education,[8] the primary purpose of education is vocational in nature. For example, the United States Department of Education's stated purpose is "to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access."[9] No doubt, the competition to which this statement refers is "jobs" or "careers." The consistent message from politicians with regard to education is that students need to be prepared to enter the "workforce," and that we must be more "competitive" in math and sciences so that Americans will not be displaced by foreign competition in the job market. So, when the question is put forth as to the end of education, the answer is "to secure a career."

On the "classical" view of education,[10] the primary purpose of education is to rear children into adults. Education by this view has the whole of the person in mind, to train boys to become men and to train girls to become women. It is not taken for granted that as children grow they will naturally mature into adults. This begs the question of what we mean by "adult." There are a range of answers to this question, but invariably the classicist will answer along the lines of Aristotle outlined above. The classicist holds that the end of education is to train the child to think and act well in accordance with virtue. Says Aristotle, "Excellence, then, being of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual excellence in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral excellence comes about as a result of habit . . . "[11] Habits themselves are trainable and we must, through education, come to learn "to enjoy the things we ought and to hate the things we ought."[12]

So, which of these two views of education is most consistent with the end of "human happiness?" The progressivist view of education, while it may prepare a student for a job, has confused the means with the end. For if it is asked, why do we want people to have careers? the answer, most assuredly would be, so that they can be "happy." How exactly having a career *ipso facto* makes one happy or just what "happiness" is, is never quite addressed, especially given how unhappy so many people are in their careers. It isolates a single part of life and leaves the children to fend for themselves in all other things.[13] Furthermore, it eliminates even the possibility of educating for "happiness" precisely because it attempts to remain neutral with regard to the definition of "humanity." Thus, progressive education is reductive by its very nature, treating children not as humans who need to be nurtured, but as animals that need to be trained.

Contrariwise, the classicist has in view an education that creates, not young adults who are prepared for a specific career, but adults who are prepared to live well no matter what their career. For "career" is not an end itself, but a means to an end.[14] Occupation is but one part of life and unless the child is taught to think and act well, even with an occupation, the child can never be fully "happy." Furthermore, classical education allows the student to stand before and judge all things, thus preparing the child for whatever may come. The carpenter, who has received only training in carpentry, may be able to judge what is or is not a good wardrobe, but not what is or is not a just society. Such judgments, however, are necessary for the fully formed human. For, to know, to judge, and to act well is what it means "to be human." As Aristotle says, "Now each man judges well the things he knows, and of these he is a good judge. And so the man who has been educated in a subject is a good judge of that subject, and the man who has received an all-round education is a good judge in general."[15]

Given this, it seems unlikely that Aristotle would have endorsed many modern schools. The education which Aristotle endorsed was one which conforms to the purpose of human beings, contributes to their proper functioning, and enables the child to grow into adulthood. An education that only equips the student to accomplish a single task is not meant for the free, liberated man. Without the ability to stand before all things and judge, the child is at the mercy of those who can. What needs to be assessed now are the best means by which to accomplish this end as well as the more robust definition of what it means to be human.

NOTES

1. Though Aristotle does not explicitly make the argument in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Thomas Aquinas argues that there must necessarily be a last end to action, otherwise there would be no action in the first place: "For that which is first in the order of intention, is the principle, as it were, moving the appetite; consequently, if you remove this principle, there will be nothing to move the appetite . . . Now the principle in the intention is the last end . . . Consequently, . . . if there were no last end, nothing would be desired…" See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), I-II, Q. 1, Art. 4.

2. Aristotle uses the word "eudaimonia" which is misleadingly translated as "happiness," and notoriously difficult to define. Etymologically, "eudaimonia" means "well-spirited" but may best be translated as "flourishing," "blessed," or "fulfilled." The English word "happiness" is derived from the Old Norse "happ," which means "chance" or "luck." Clearly this cannot be what Aristotle has in mind. See Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, Bollingen Series, vol. 2, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1099b9-17.

3. I will here presuppose that humans do, in fact, have a function or a nature, contrary to the modern existentialists who argue that in man "existence precedes essence." For philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre, the fact that humans do not have a nature means there is no right and wrong way to be human and, consequently there is no objective meaning to any of our actions. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotion (A Philosophical Library Book)*, reissue ed. (New York: Citadel, 1987).

4. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1098a7-8.

5. Ibid., 1098a15-17.

6. Ibid., 1102a5. Though not within the scope of this paper, an argument could be made that this is consistent with a biblical definition of humanity. For a full treatment of this, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica,* I-II, Q.1–5.

7. Here and throughout, I will not assess the means (i.e., methods and materials) by which the two views on education attempt to reach their ends, but only the ends themselves.

8. Because it is beyond the scope of this essay to offer a robust definition of "progressive education" I will assume the broadest definition of the term. Roughly speaking the "progressive" view of education is identified with the works of John Dewey, the educational reforms he instituted, and those who carry on his view and work.

9. U.S. Department of Education, "About ED: Overview and Mission Statement," http://www2.ed.gov/about/landing/jhtml.

10. Like with "progressive," the term "classical" cannot be fully defined and defended here. For my purposes the term "classical" refers to the pre-Dewey views on education most closely associated with liberal arts education, Renaissance humanism, ACCS, or Mortimer Adler's *Paideia Program*.

11. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1103a14.

12. Ibid., 1172a22.

13. "What is simple and indivisible in its own nature, human miscalculation divides and drags away from the true and the perfect to the false and the imperfect." Ancius Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy: Revised Edition* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1999), Bk III, Ch. 9.4–6.

14. Technically speaking, no classical author would refer to a "career" as a part of happiness. Rather, a certain level of independence is created by a stable career in the modern world and this independence is an aid to happiness. See, for example, Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy,* Bk. III, Ch. 8–9.

15. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1094b27-95a1.