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Abstract

The Spirit of Education: Politics and Pedagogy in Plato, Rousseau, Dewey, and Freire
Stephanie Almeida Nevin
2021

Education has long been romanticized by political thinkers for its supposed power to shape ideal selves and societies. This dissertation examines the history of political thought on education and contends that citizens are principally educated through socialization by law, culture, and institutions. Revealing the limits of utilitarian visions of education as subject formation, this dissertation ultimately argues against the excessive idealization of education as a means of realizing individual and collective projects of becoming. It argues for a reevaluation of education as a truth-seeking activity for all ages.

In “Molding Citizens: Plato’s Question,” I offer a rereading of Plato’s body of work through the lens of education. Against common readings, I contend that Socrates was less a model teacher and more a model student who forced Plato to grapple with whether good citizens are the products of good teachers and with whether education as a truth-seeking activity is antithetical to that civic end. I show how Plato maintained that good citizenship is not primarily the result of a teacher’s lessons, but of the law, culture, and institutions that structure lifelong association. I further demonstrate how he considered whether the socialization that determines becoming could be intentionally designed and perfected.

In “Cultivating Man: Rousseau’s Experiment,” I argue that Rousseau saw a critical problem with Plato’s model because association will only produce ideal persons and citizens if and when a given society is already ideal. In response, Rousseau offered his *Emile* as an experiment in limiting socialization at the individual level in order to

create a new ideal who might resist the toxic effects of a non-ideal society. Against common readings, I contend that Rousseau did not advocate molding persons toward predetermined models. Instead, he suggested cultivating the potential of each individual through a personalized and inimitable educational program of anti-socialization.

Rousseau also put his theory into practice by creating curated fictional worlds for his readers, writing novels that provided ideal, private, and imagined experiences of socialization.

In “Developing Liberal Democrats: Dewey’s Synthesis,” I reveal how Dewey sought to harmonize the apparent tensions between Plato and Rousseau by generating a democratic theory of education still embraced by contemporary political theorists today. Following Hegel, Dewey maintained that educators need not choose between educating for the individual and educating for society because each could be perfected through the other. Analyzing his conception of education as growth, I show that although Dewey claimed to embrace an idea of education that has no end and is lifelong, he ultimately relied on a necessarily progressive view of education that placed excessive, undue hope on the institution of the school. I demonstrate how in relegating all education to the service of society, Dewey owed more to Plato than is typically realized, and that because he did not adequately recognize the value of individuals understood as separable from their contribution to social progress, he further foreclosed the possibility of education as a purely private or solitary truth-seeking activity.

In “Realizing the Revolution: Freire’s Critical Pedagogy,” I introduce political theorists to Paulo Freire, a pedagogue whose reception in the United States as a founder of critical pedagogy made him a giant in the field of education studies but obscured his

contributions to political thought. Whereas Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey each stressed the power and importance of ongoing socialization from childhood, Freire took a different approach, suggesting that one's interpretation of experience is more important to becoming than experience itself. Taking adult education as his starting point, Freire suggested that what society needed was not a theory of learning for children, but rather a theory of *unlearning* for adults that would result in concrete action against all oppression in society. Valuing neither stability nor incremental progress, Freire redefined education as a praxis that prompts critical consciousness and radical change. For him, education could never and should never aspire to be neutral or separate from becoming and the realization of ideals.

Finally, in "Living to Learn: An Alternative," I conclude by defending education as a truth-seeking activity separable from projects of individual and collective becoming. Having examined how each thinker resolves or struggles with the tension between these two "spirits" of education, usually in favor of becoming, I argue for a reassessment of education as an intrinsically valuable practice of truth-seeking to be enjoyed by children but most especially by adults within and outside the boundaries of the school.

The Spirit of Education:
Politics and Pedagogy in Plato, Rousseau, Dewey, and Freire

A Dissertation
Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Yale University
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Stephanie Almeida Nevin

Dissertation Director: Bryan Garsten

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This dissertation began as a set of questions about the purpose of education and its relationship to politics. They were questions I kept coming back to well after college and usually in the quiet moments—waiting for the bus to work, enjoying a coffee break, or traveling home after a long day. Eventually these questions drove me back to the university, to that special place where I might find the freedom to seriously pursue them. Yale gave me the luxury of solitude and turned those quiet moments into long hours of secluded study.

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*To those who wonder in the quiet,
and to James Timothy Nevin,
who wonders with me.*

I

What is Education for?

Education bears the weight of all dreams. This seems especially true in democratic societies that reject in principle the importance of birth and blood for deciding fortunes, relying instead on education as the primary means and requirement for realizing individual and collective desires. Wealth, status, and power; beauty, truth, and goodness; liberty, humanity, and wisdom—all these and more are promised fulfillment through education. Education is exalted not only for what it can give to students, but because of how it promises to make students into the very thing it offers. Through and with education, children might become whatever they desire, or at least what others desire for them.

There is no shortage of pronouncements on what education is for, or rather what individuals and societies should desire for themselves. Sometimes, these declarations appear in the form of exhortations or polemics that reveal the extent to which while having education is thought to be an essential good, a lack of education—or the wrong kind—is a scapegoat for countless harms. That is, political, social, and economic problems are frequently cast as miseducation problems, and everything from poor political judgment, to social division, to economic disadvantage is thought fixable

through more and better education.¹ Schools are expected to do everything from training workers and creating leaders to improving morals and perpetuating culture.²

As a private and public good with so many perceived social, political, and economic benefits, it is no wonder that education is the site of so much debate, dismay, and above all, hope. Even when critiqued, it is often treated as a panacea, as a solution to itself.³ But why is education thought to explain and solve so many problems? What

¹ As historian Lawrence Cremin noted, education has been deemed “a leading weapon in everything from the fight against race discrimination to the war on poverty to the drive for political and economic competitiveness.” Lawrence Cremin, *Popular Education and Its Discontents*, 1st edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 93. Optimism about education has a long history in the United States, where the spread and rise of public schooling was driven by 19th century reformers like Horace Mann who believed in the “perfectibility of human life and institutions.” Lawrence Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957*, 1st edition (New York: Vintage, 1964), 8.

² By the Progressive Era, schools were increasingly seen as the instruments of social progress, and their reach was expanded to “include directed concern for health, vocation, and the quality of family and community life.” Lawrence Cremin, *The Transformation of the School*, viii. According to Hannah Arendt, the United States is especially disposed to have a utopian view of education because, on her reading, Americans have a distinct love of the new and an affinity for youth. Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” in *Between Past and Future* (Penguin, 2006), 170–93.

³ The main exception to this pattern of optimism is found at the level of higher education, where skeptics tend to question the supposed benefits of a college education against the investment required. For a recent example, see Bryan Caplan, *The Case against Education: Why the Education System Is a Waste of Time and Money*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018). Even in this case, the author advocates more and better (vocational) education. It is exceedingly rare for education critics to argue against education altogether. Rather, across the political spectrum, they essentially make a case for reform. See, for example, William F. Buckley, *God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of “Academic Freedom”* (Simon and Schuster, 2012); Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (Simon and Schuster, 2008); William Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* (Simon and Schuster, 2014); Michael M. Crow and William B. Dabars, *The Fifth Wave: The Evolution of American Higher Education* (JHU Press, 2020); Anthony T. Kronman, *The Assault on American Excellence* (Simon and Schuster, 2020).

accounts for such persistent faith in both the private and public utility of education? And what if that impulse to point to education not only obscures better solutions, but cloaks something important about the nature of education itself?

In this dissertation, I argue that the answers to these questions begin with the realization that education is too often conflated with the art of becoming. What is so attractive about education is that it not only offers to produce problem-solving goods like knowledge, technology, and wealth, but to also form and improve the people who will use and develop those tools. It promises to generate problem solving tools *and* create problem solvers. Understood as the art of becoming, education is that which transforms human potential, that which makes children into adult, citizens, leaders, and workers. Children receive an education so that they can emerge fully formed and ready to participate in all aspects of society. When seen in this light, the answer to the question “What is education for?” is simple: It is the means by which ideal selves and societies are realized.

In other words, much of the power attributed to education is rooted in its supposed ability to shape and develop selves and societies. This raises numerous questions, all with political implications: Who should be shaped? How should they be shaped? What should they be shaped for? Can one be shaped by another into a free and autonomous being, or is this an inherent contradiction? Who has the power to shape, and what is the proper balance of authority between students, teachers, families, and the state? These questions are critical, but they all rely on the assumption that education can and should seek to form and “create” subjects and societies; that education is fundamentally the art of individual and collective becoming.

This assumption is not new. As I will demonstrate, education for becoming has a long history that includes the Greek idea of *paideia* as well as the German *Bildung* tradition, and education has long been romanticized by political thinkers for its supposed power to realize ideal selves and societies. Plato, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Dewey, and Paulo Freire all made education central to their political visions. For them, education was more than a means of generating or at least approximating the ideal agents presupposed by their political theories; each understood education to be absolutely critical to political conservation, development, and transformation.

I turn to these specific figures not only because they exemplify some of the highest dreams for and deepest fears around education and politics, but because they are self-consciously in conversation with one another, and to my knowledge all four have never been studied together. Although education has undeniably undergone momentous changes since Plato, each thinker listens and speaks to the last, building on, tearing down, and adapting what was already said in light of their own time, place, and needs. Among their numerous influences, they count one another: Rousseau read and responded directly to Plato, Dewey read and responded directly to Plato and Rousseau, and Freire read and responded directly to Dewey, Plato, and—if his personal library records are any indication—Rousseau as well.

This dissertation is attentive to the historical context of these thinkers at the same time that it is committed to examining their ideas in relation to one other. Ultimately, I am most interested in what is ceded both in their conversation and in contemporary discourse, namely, education as an activity for itself. I argue that in stressing education as becoming and in subordinating education to political needs and dreams, these thinkers

both overstated the power of education and demanded its constraint. Focused on education for managing individual and collective projects of becoming, they suppressed or neglected education as an intrinsically valuable activity that springs from the human desire to know why and how and what if, even when that knowledge serves no purpose.

Admittedly, the idea that education is socially, politically, and economically useful because it can shape ideal selves and societies has been critical to generating and maintaining support for education, resulting not only in its spread but in remarkable achievements at the individual, national, and global level. And yet, I suggest, education is widely oversold as the art of becoming, as a way of realizing ideal selves and societies. Too often, education is pushed to the front lines of social, political, and economic problems because it is easier to gesture at schools than it is to implement direct and immediate solutions.⁴

In the remainder of this introduction, I review the contemporary scholarship on the civic, moral, and vocational promises of education. I demonstrate how much of the literature continues to be informed by the assumption that education is for and synonymous with shaping ideal selves and societies. Next, I argue for the necessity of distinguishing between what I term education for becoming and education for truth seeking, and I theorize three modes through which the activity of education occurs. Finally, I provide a summary of the remainder of the dissertation.

⁴ As education historians David Tyack and Larry Cuban argued in *Tinkering Toward Utopia*, “The utopian tradition of social reform through schooling has often diverted attention from more costly, politically controversial, and difficult to file reforms.” David B. Tyack, Larry Cuban, and David B. Tyack, *Tinkering toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 3.

The Promise of Education

For most political thinkers, the promise of education is predictably civic. As it is commonly understood, civic education is instruction primarily aimed at children with the goal of creating fully formed adult citizens. In the United States, a “true” civic education is thought to be liberalizing and democratizing. It is rightly seen as distinct from the outright indoctrination of citizens found in illiberal, authoritarian contexts.⁵ But while the methods and ends between them may vary significantly, all forms of government have been invested in using education to develop and shape youth toward a model adult image, be it a subject, citizen, or ruler. As Aristotle observed long ago, the nature and amount of preparation children are thought to require for political life varies by regime type and is informed by competing notions of what makes an ideal citizen.⁶ But, I argue, while their aims and emphases may differ, all proponents of political education are united in their belief that education should be used to intentionally shape persons and communities toward ideals. Moreover, this same logic underpins the arguments of those who stress the

⁵ As J. Peter Euben and Elizabeth Kiss argue, there is a distinction between “political” and “politicized” education. The latter “regards the ‘objects’ of instruction as passive recipients of knowledge which molds them according to some blueprint of the good society,” but the former “seeks to cultivate the capacity for independent judgment, including consider judgment the challenge the beliefs and assumptions of the educator.” Elizabeth Kiss and J. Peter Euben, “Aim High: A Response to Stanley Fish,” in *Debating Moral Education: Rethinking the Role of the Modern University*, ed. Elizabeth Kiss and J. Peter Euben (Duke University Press Books, 2010), 65. See also J. Peter Euben, *Corrupting Youth: Political Education, Democratic Culture, and Political Theory* (Princeton University Press, 1997).

⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Hackett Publishing, 1997), III.4, 1276b20-35.

liberal and vocational promise of education, either with or against proponents of civic education.

Formal civic education almost always has two goals, and scholars tend to stress one or the other: fostering civic bonds and teaching civic skills. To seek to foster civic bonds is to acknowledge that a group of citizens is first and foremost a community and that the mutual respect, love, and loyalty of its members ensure not only peace and cooperation within the community, but a willingness to defend it against external threats. Feelings of attachment and unity depend on something shared, be it an understanding of governing principles, values, and ideals or of a common territory, origin, and culture. Civic education offers a means of teaching what is shared in order to intentionally create those bonds, and their basis, intensity, and exclusiveness determine whether they comprise an “enlightened patriotism” or blind nationalism.⁷

The spread of mass education coincided with, among other forces, the need to ensure that youth would grow into loyal citizens who identify with their nation. As Benedict Anderson argued in *Imagined Communities*, when faced with the growth of popular movements that threatened the legitimacy of the dynastic order, European monarchies sought to foster nationalism in order to validate and defend themselves. According to Anderson, this “official” nationalism was deliberately and strategically established in Europe and elsewhere after organically emerging in the Americas with the timely development of print capitalism. Among the mechanisms used to foster

⁷ For more on the distinction between patriotism and nationalism, see Steven B. Smith, *Reclaiming Patriotism in an Age of Extremes* (Yale University Press, 2021).

nationalism, public education systems played a large role alongside the media and administrative regulations.

There are countless historical and contemporary case studies of state-sponsored attempts to exploit literacy campaigns, schooling, and curriculum in order to foster nationalism. In *Peasants into Frenchmen*, the historian Eugen Weber argued that instituting public education in France was, in addition to military service, the critical mechanism for teaching French national identity, a concept that had not existed amongst the peasantry before those late 19th century reforms. One could also point to extreme examples of nationalist mass education in Nazi Germany as well as efforts to Americanize and assimilate immigrant and indigenous children in the United States or efforts to foster a national identity in post-colonial Africa.⁸ From Greece to Nicaragua, studies have shown how education has been purposefully designed in order to foster a shared identity and build national unity.⁹

But as Steven B. Smith argues, the forging of common culture among citizens does not have to be nationalistic or even at odds with pluralism.¹⁰ In *Democracy and Distrust*, Stephen Macedo insists that “all political regimes, even pluralistic liberal ones”

⁸ Redie Bereketeab, “Education as an Instrument of Nation-Building in Postcolonial Africa,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 20, no. 1 (2020): 71–90.

⁹ Luciano Baracco, “The Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade Revisited: The Teaching of Literacy as a Nation-Building Project,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 23, no. 3 (2004): 339–54; Leda Glyptis, “Love, Truth and National Identity Prescriptions: Recounting the 1919-1922 War in Greek School Textbooks,” *Internationale Schulbuchforschung* 29, no. 1 (2007): 103–19.

¹⁰ Smith, *Reclaiming Patriotism in an Age of Extremes*.

necessitate “a considerable measure of convergence on basic political values.”¹¹ But regardless of whether civic education aims at a culture that is tolerant of freedom and diversity or not, an underlying assumption remains: Education is understood as the means by which individuals *become* or at least approximate an ideal people and community, generation after generation.

The second goal of civic education is to teach children the knowledge and skills required for full participation in the political community, be it as virtuous rulers, leaders, or citizens. Rather than focus exclusively on creating civic bonds, this goal stresses the development of civic capacities, and it is given particular prominence in the literature on democratic education because in democratic societies citizens must learn to rule themselves and others in turn. In *Teachers of the People*, Dana Villa describes the historical emergence of this idea through the political thought of Rousseau, Hegel, Tocqueville, and Mill. These thinkers, he argues, realized that the private education typically associated with the rulers and elites of non-democratic society had to be transformed, democratized, and made public.¹² As Benjamin Barber put it, “Democratic education mediates the ancient quarrel between the rule of opinion and the rule of excellence by informing opinion and, through universal education in excellence, creating

¹¹ Stephen Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy* (Harvard University Press, 2003).

¹² Dana Villa, *Teachers of the People: Political Education in Rousseau, Hegel, Tocqueville, and Mill* (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

an aristocracy of everyone.”¹³ Democratic education is, in other words, the art of *becoming* excellent rulers.

Thinkers in this category include participatory democrats like Benjamin Barber as well as deliberative democrats like Amy Guttmann who insist that education must be crafted to enable democratic citizens to collectively deliberate the future of their society.¹⁴ In emphasizing skills, these thinkers distinguish themselves from those who would seek to inculcate specific values or beliefs in citizens, including a common culture. Some scholars, however, do stress both aims. William Galston, for example, rejects Guttmann’s ideal as “a piece—but only a piece” of the civic education that is needed, insisting instead on the promotion of “both a core of civic commitments” as well as democratic “competences” that must include the ability to evaluate and choose representatives.¹⁵

Skill-based civic education appeals to liberal thinkers in particular because it stresses developing the capacities of individuals who can weigh and choose their own conception of the good. It is important to note, however, that these thinkers also continue to rely on a notion of education as becoming. Their end remains one of “producing” ideal

¹³ Benjamin Barber, *Aristocracy of Everyone* (Random House Publishing Group, 2012), 5. Compare this to Leo Strauss who thought that the “necessary” task of (liberal) education was to “found an aristocracy within mass democratic society.” Leo Strauss, “What Is Liberal Education?,” in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, (Chicago, I.L.: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 5.

¹⁴ Amy Guttmann, *Democratic Education*, Revised edition (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999).

¹⁵ William A. Galston, “Civic Education in the Liberal State,” in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 93.

individuals, albeit self-shaping ones with the freedom to determine their own ends and beliefs.¹⁶ Political theorists of education tend not to question civic *formation* as a central goal of education, but rather what vision of democratic citizenship is most desirable and therefore what virtues should be stressed. For the Rawlsian-inspired Eamonn Callan, for instance, the vision is one that requires “creating citizens” who will be “liberal patriots.”¹⁷ For the cosmopolitan Martha Nussbaum, education must “cultivate humanity” and “create citizens of the world.”¹⁸

Nussbaum’s aspiration to cultivate global citizens is a politicized version of a different promise of education: that it can cultivate character, creating a self with dignity, purpose, and value. Whereas some thinkers stress education as that which makes possible the democratic political participation necessary for human flourishing, for others, education is what enables human flourishing to occur in spite of or in addition to politics. As Anthony Kronman notes, it used to be taken for granted that reading great books, examining history, and studying philosophy were essential to building character and to cultivating the moral and intellectual habits required for living a good life.¹⁹

¹⁶ As Geoffrey Vaughan notes, “Contemporary theorizing in political education [...] is caught between *producing* autonomous individuals, on the one hand, and deeply committed democratic citizens, on the other.” Vaughan, “The Overreach of Political Education and Liberalism’s Philosopher-Democrat,” 389 (emphasis added).

¹⁷ Eamonn Callan, *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹⁸ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

¹⁹ Anthony T. Kronman, *Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

Often taking a very narrow scope of the range of disciplines that have this effect, contemporary thinkers in this group tend to idealize the humanities and the ages between eighteen and twenty-two. Focusing on higher education and describing a very small sector of elite institutions, they stress how colleges and universities can and should morally guide and transform students. For Andrew Delbanco, college “should be a place where young people find help for navigating the territory between adolescence and adulthood” and where they not only “develop certain qualities of mind and heart requisite for reflective citizenship,” but also find guidance “on their way toward self-knowledge.”²⁰

Whether they stress civic or liberal education, most of these thinkers tend to reject the view that education ought to only or primarily serve economic ends. This is unsurprising given that the disciplines most believed to contribute to the cultivation of humanity and good citizenship are also the ones that raise the most skepticism regarding their financial practicality. And so, against those who would, for example, eliminate humanities education in the name of economic efficiency, defenders of liberal and democratic education tend to maintain that the true value of education is not in its ability to create future employers and employees, but rather better citizens and humans. They therefore seek to redirect attention away from economic justifications of education and toward its civic, democratic, moral, and liberal potential.

But from the beginning, American schools have been asked to be *both* civic educators and to provide professional training, in part because democratization coincided

²⁰ Andrew Delbanco’s *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 3.

with industrialization. Early American thinkers like Noah Webster and Benjamin Rush insisted not only on the importance of educating toward a national, democratic identity, but of adapting traditional liberal arts curriculums to suit the needs of the new commercial republic.²¹ For them, to make education more practical was to make it more distinctly American, but today's advocates of vocational training tend to stress the development of marketable skills without reference to a distinctly American identity. Not unlike the skills-based advocates of civic education, those thinkers driven by the economic promise of education see it as an instrument for becoming. Their assumption is that education is the means by which ideal worker-selves and capitalist societies can be realized.

In her attempt to reconcile the divide between advocates of liberal and vocational education, Danielle Allen maintains that both justifications for education are correct, but at different levels. Whereas those who argue that education is for "securing a job" identify the compelling state interest in supporting education, those who argue that education is for "enriching the life of the mind" offer justification at the level of the individual. Allen insists that education must always keep in mind the perspective of the individual student and the goal of maximizing individual flourishing because excessive focus on social utility leads to the instrumentalization of the student in service of the state and economy. At the same time, any theory that advocates individual human flourishing, she suggests, must also include material wellbeing.²² In making this argument, Allen

²¹ See Frederick Rudolph, *Essays on Education in the Early Republic* (Harvard University Press, 2013).

²² Danielle Allen, *Education and Equality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 9.

follows in the footsteps of John Dewey who insisted that in a democracy one could educate individuals toward a collective, civic ideal that includes material well-being while encouraging individual autonomy. While she stresses individual flourishing, her conception of it is both economic and political. Ultimately, she is most interested in education as a tool for achieving justice and equality.²³ That is, for Allen, education is the means by which societies *become* more just and equal.

As Allen herself notes, all of the seemingly contradictory justifications of education—whether they emphasize vocational training, civic education, or individual flourishing—share a fundamental desire to “direct the development of human capacities.”²⁴ That is, they seek to use education to guide human development toward an ideal. As Allan Bloom put it, “every educational system” seeks to “produce a certain kind of human being.”²⁵ Most disagreements are not about whether education *is* formation, but about the proper ends of shaping, the best curriculum for achieving them, and how much students should be permitted to shape themselves.

As I have shown, the language of becoming is everywhere in education. Even those who defend the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake tend to speak of education as a means for becoming. John Henry Newman, for example, drew on Cicero to speak of the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, but his main point was that liberal education

²³ Danielle Allen and Rob Reich, *Education, Justice, and Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

²⁴ Allen, 11.

²⁵ Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 26.

“makes” the gentleman while only religion can produce morally virtuous individuals.²⁶ Michael Oakeshott, another advocate of the intrinsic value of learning, still insists on linking learning to becoming.²⁷ The promise of education is not really in understanding itself, but in becoming. Students are required to attend school to *become* educated. There, they are developed, formed, trained, equipped, and made into better citizens, workers, and humans.

Truth and Becoming

As I have already suggested, political thinkers and philosophers have long turned to the supposed power of education to shape ideal selves and societies. But how exactly does education shape? What does the activity of education entail? And does it always take shaping or becoming as its end? In this dissertation, I theorize three modes through which learning occurs: (1) formal instruction from others (“transmission”), (2) association with others (“socialization”), and (3) inquiry conducted alone or with others (“inquiry”). In the paragraphs that follow, I define these terms in more depth and offer an overview of how Plato, Rousseau, Dewey, and Freire saw each mode as helping or hindering education as becoming. I show how while all thinkers agreed that socialization and not transmissions is the more effective mode of education for shaping individuals and societies, they disagreed on the role that inquiry should play in part because of the three

²⁶ John Henry Cardinal Newman, *The Idea of a University* (Washington, D.C.: Lanham, Md: Gateway Editions, 1999), 89.

²⁷ Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning* (Liberty Fund, 1989), 21.

modes, inquiry is most suggestive of a kind of education that does not aim at individual or collective projects of becoming.

(1) *Transmission*: What I term transmission is learning through formal teachings. Transmission is learning that occurs through the intentional, direct transfer of knowledge and skills to a student. Typically, these teachings are understood as lessons that can be received, bought, sold and kept. When applied to subject formation, transmission is thought to form subjects by impressing students with knowledge and habits. Those who turn to education as transmission for subject formation tend to assume that children are malleable or even to some extent programmable. On this view, children are molded through the lessons of parents and teachers who are then credited or blamed according to whether the child becomes or fails to become what is hoped or expected. Ignoring the fact that while students may certainly learn content, they can just as quickly forget it, proponents of this mode of education tend to view frequent testing as a common-sense way of ensuring that education is “working” and that learning is being absorbed by the student.²⁸

(2) *Socialization*: What I term socialization is learning through social experience. Socialization is learning that occurs through the laws, cultures, and institutions that guide and structure social interactions and incentivize behaviors. By definition, education as socialization is always ongoing. When applied to subject formation, socialization is

²⁸ Richard Arum and Josipa Roka’s *Academically Adrift* exemplifies this way of thinking. There, they argue that students are not learning in college because they are socializing, as proven by assessments which purport to measure skills like critical thinking. *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

thought to form subjects, often subconsciously, through association with one another. As I will demonstrate, the thinkers studied in this dissertation all agreed that while education is widely associated with the more easily measurable and commodifiable mode of transmission, socialization is the most important mode of education by which individuals and societies become ideal selves. Although their accounts speak of socializing children into socialized adults, each thinker calls attention to the importance of ongoing education for all ages. That is, for the most part, they understand socialization to be a process that never fully ends.

Put another way, far from conflating civic education with schooling, Plato, Rousseau, Dewey, and Freire emphasize the importance of social relationships and associations in civic formation.²⁹ As Tocquevillian thinkers insist, rather than view teachers as agents who can simply make children into good citizens by instructing them through transmissible lessons, one must instead look to those structures that comprise communal life, including culture in all its forms as well as law and the economy.³⁰ Today, it is taken for granted that schools should perform many of the functions previously assumed to be the responsibility of families, religious organizations, and

²⁹ In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam shows how decline in civic virtue was connected to the breakdown of social structures and associations. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: Revised and Updated: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon and Schuster, 2001).

³⁰ In *Teachers of the People*, Dana Villa criticizes political philosophers for paternalistically seeking to shape and form the people, but he also admits that “A good deal of political education is, and must be, indirect. Institutions, fundamental laws, political culture, participation, and the experience (or knowledge) of injustice in society all have a role to play in that education.” Villa, *Teachers of the People*, 276. But if this is the case, then whether they are aware of it or not, all political philosophers are in some sense philosophers of the education of all people, and not just of “the people.”

community life.³¹ But as contemporary skeptics of civic education in schools such as James Bernard Murphy argue, there is a gap between civic knowledge and civic virtue, and civic skills are “mainly acquired not by children in schools but by adults in churches, unions, civic organizations, and workplaces.”³²

The idea of education as socialization does not suggest that schooling does not matter at all for civic education, but that what matters most is less the precise content of the curriculum than the “hidden curriculum” of informal and often unconscious education that happens around in and around the classroom.³³ How content is taught, the culture between and among teachers and students, the rules and manner of their enforcement, the available extracurricular activities, and even the architecture and design of schools are all important factors. One must look not simply to the influence of teachers, but to the

³¹ As Laurence Cremin observed, much of the school reform that took place in the Progressive Era in the United States was driven by a sense that “educational functions traditionally carried on by family, neighborhood, or shop are no longer being performed” and that the school simply had to step in to provide them. Cremin, *The Transformation of the School*, 117.

³² James Bernard Murphy, “Against Civic Education in Schools,” *Debating Moral Education: Rethinking the Role of the Modern University*, ed. Elizabeth Kiss and J. Peter Euben (Duke University Press Books, 2010), 168.

³³ Since it was first coined by Philip Jackson in 1968, the hidden curriculum has been a key concept for sociologists of education. Philip Wesley Jackson, *A Life in Classrooms: Philip W. Jackson and the Practice of Education* (Teachers College Press, 2007).

influence of peers.³⁴ These local, on-the-ground realities are just as if not more important than the tangible content of a formal lesson plan.³⁵

At the same time, socialization is not all-powerful, and it is important to moderate hopes both about the possibilities for directing socialization as well as the malleability of subjects. As Ruth W. Grant argues with reference to humanistic education in particular, while it can “make people more ethical,” some students, are not “shaped by their education,” but “appropriate it and mold it to fit their characteristic dispositions,” and not necessarily for the better.³⁶ Subjects are also agents. This means, for example, that while one can insist on any number of rules or purposes for a school, ultimately, they are places to be filled by people who will make of them what they will.

(3) *Inquiry*: Finally, what I term inquiry is learning through questioning. Inquiry is the education that occurs by asking questions one does not yet have answers to or by

³⁴ As David A. Hoekema argues, “Students pattern their choices, and even their lives, on other students whom they admire. This is to say that the most influential teachers of ethics on our campuses, in the long run, are probably other students—individuals whom we as faculty and staff members tend to see as recipients rather than sources of instruction.” David Hoekema, “Is There an Ethicist in the House? How Can We Tell?,” in *Debating Moral Education: Rethinking the Role of the Modern University*, ed. Elizabeth Kiss and J. Peter Euben (Duke University Press Books, 2010), 249–66.

³⁵ For Michael Oakeshott, socialization cannot properly be called education. True education, he insists, involves “self-conscious engagement” and “is not an induced reaction to a fortuitous environmental pressure.” Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, 84. However, by socialization, Oakeshott meant “an apprenticeship to adult life—teaching, training, instructing, imparting knowledge, learning, etc.—governed by an extrinsic purpose” (22). His definition of socialization is therefore closer to my notion of education as becoming. Except for the fact that even as he insists on a non-instrumental vision of education, he also cannot resist the language of human becoming, there are strong affinities between our critiques.

³⁶ Ruth W. Grant, “Is Humanistic Education Humanizing?,” in *Debating Moral Education: Rethinking the Role of the Modern University*, ed. Elizabeth Kiss and J. Peter Euben (Duke University Press Books, 2010), 293.

re-asking questions for which the answers are assumed: It is a never-ending succession of “whys” that generate insights as often as frustrations; it is a never-ending succession of “hows” that lead to endless studies of the invisibly small and incomprehensibly large phenomena that make up the universe; and it is a never-ending succession of “what ifs” that lead to the most beautiful and sublime combinations of color, movement, and sound. Education as inquiry is not the province of any one field—it is neither the exclusive domain of philosophy nor of the scientific method. Unlike transmission which presumes a knower who can transmit information to one who does not know, inquiry is often self-directed and can occur in solitude as well as with others.

To be clear, the distinction I am making between transmission and inquiry is not between education as teaching and learning and education as research. First, like all education, research is teaching and learning, albeit among colleagues instead of between teachers and students. Second, classroom spaces are not limited to transmission and socialization; they often have all three modes of education occurring at once. Although I have presented each mode as distinct, all three of the modes can easily coincide in any given moment of education. To speak of education in modes is to stress that education is above all an activity that occurs at a particular moment. It is not a quality that one either possesses or does not possess.

As I will demonstrate, of all the modes of education, inquiry occupies a unique place in the history of political thought on education. Not only is it the most self-referential mode for the political philosophers, it is also the subject of the most disagreement. As the figures studied in this dissertation well know, inquiry can either serve, threaten, or be useless to the socio-politico-economic order. Whereas transmission

is directed by a teacher and socialization can be somewhat managed through laws and institutions, inquiry is more difficult to control and its results are usually unpredictable: It can create miraculous new medicines as well as Frankensteinian monsters. When turned toward social life, it can threaten—for better *or* worse—the order and justice of social, political, and economic life.

More than any other mode of education, inquiry suggests an alternative compelling conception of education; one that is not about shaping selves or societies, but rather about the pleasure of the pursuit of truth and understanding. As I will demonstrate, for different reasons, not one of the thinkers studied in this dissertation makes room for this kind of unrestricted inquiry. Whereas Plato prefers to limit when inquiry is practiced and by whom, Rousseau insists on banishing it from public life both for its own good as well as the good of society. By contrast, Dewey and Freire cannot separate inquiry from sociopolitical utility at all, respectively insisting it is not a threat or embracing it precisely because it threatens. That is, both Dewey and Freire find inquiry to be integral to democratic subject formation and so make the inquiring citizen synonymous with the virtuous one. They further seek to meld the modes of inquiry and socialization to the point where education is no longer conceivable apart from becoming.

Taken together, much of the contemporary and historical political thought on education leaves one with the impression that education is for shaping and mastering future selves at the convenience of, for, and in the interest of politics, society, and economics. The belief that education is the art of becoming is a seductive and understandable one. It is a definition that plays into a very human love of origin stories and coming-of-age stories, as well as the view that a self is a fundamentally progressive

and perfectible being. It is a conception of education that inspires; allowing people to imagine better futures for themselves and their children.³⁷ But it is also an idea with mixed results, motivating noble journeys of personal growth and development as well as state-sponsored indoctrination camps. It has given the world everything from “reform” schools for boys and “finishing” schools for girls to “civilizing” schools for indigenous populations. Schools and businesses continue to profit enormously from the idea that education is the key to realizing a more perfect future self, as they promise to “make” students and clients into whatever they wish to become.

I maintain that to conflate education with the production of selves is to risk forgetting that people are both always unfinished and always more than what they learn. No one is ever really “educated” in that final sense of the term, although one might be described as cultured, knowledgeable, socialized, qualified, certified, or schooled. When learning is thought of as worthwhile only because of what it promises to create in the future, one loses sight of its intrinsic value as an activity for itself, as a universal and accessible activity for all ages. Instead, education comes to be seen as the privilege of the young who are yet to be shaped. But to focus the vast majority of educational energies on youth simply because of their “unshaped” quality is to prioritize those who have the least

³⁷ The authors of “A Nation at Risk” captured how integral education is to the American dream when they wrote that education is key to the “promise” that that “all, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance into the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to that most. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hoped to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment and to manage their own lives, thereby serving that only their own interests but also the progress of society itself.” United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*, 8.

amount of say and control over their education at the expense of adults who, if given the opportunity, might more readily and voluntarily appreciate it.

Moreover, to limit education to the production of selves or goods with political, social, and economic utility is to miss that transmission, socialization, and inquiry are all inevitable, necessary, and worthwhile modes of education that need no justification. Asking questions, socializing with others, and deliberately sharing knowledge, skills, behaviors, and beliefs are educational activities that need not be intentionally directed at individual and collective projects of becoming or socio-politico-economic systems in order to have value.

To limit education to the art of becoming is to lose sight of education for the pursuit of truth and understanding as an end in itself for everyone.³⁸ Already, too many insist that it is not even possible: Why understand if not to use? Why know if not to master? Nevertheless, in this dissertation I defend education for the pursuit of understanding at all ages and affirm the intrinsic value of inquiry for all people, whether they are in schools or not. Education is not merely for becoming, but tied to something more: to satisfying the human desire to question, even when the answer is useless, impossible, or dangerous.

Summary of Chapters

³⁸ As Zena Hitz puts it, the desires to know, learn, and understand are distinct from the desires for anything else, especially anything involving social and political life. Zena Hitz, *Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 57.

I have argued that contemporary political theory is primarily interested in education as a tool for realizing individual and collective projects of becoming. The remainder of this dissertation will examine how this idea has roots in the history of political thought on education. I will show how together, Plato, Rousseau, Dewey, and Freire persuasively demonstrate why it is a mistake to think that citizens are “made” through formal instruction in childhood. Rather, a true civic education is only found in ongoing and lifelong association with others. I will further argue that to reduce education to a tool for realizing individual and collective projects of becoming is to neglect the true spirit of education: seeking moments of understanding. Rather than value education for what it can promise—that is, for its socio-politico-economic utility—education should be valued as a worthwhile activity in its own right for all.

In the chapter that follows, “Molding Citizens: Plato’s Question,” I offer a rereading of Plato’s body of work through the lens of education. Against common readings, I argue that Socrates was less a model teacher and more a model student who embodies truth-seeking inquiry. I also show how Socrates posed a problem for Plato and forced him to grapple with the extent to which good citizens are the products of good teachers. In the end, Plato maintained that good citizenship is not the result of a teacher’s lessons (transmission), but of the laws, cultures, and institutions that structure lifelong association (socialization). I further demonstrate how he considered whether the socialization that determines becoming could be intentionally designed and perfected. Can and should truth-seeking inquiry be restricted to serve social interests?

In chapter three, “Cultivating Man: Rousseau’s Experiment,” I demonstrate how Rousseau faced a critical problem with Plato’s model of civic education: Socialization

will only produce good men and good citizens if and when a given society is already good. In *Emile*, Rousseau experimented with limiting socialization at the individual level in order to create an ideal man who might resist the toxic effects of a non-ideal society. Against common readings, I show that Rousseau did not advocate molding men toward predetermined models. Instead, he suggested cultivating the potential of each individual through a personalized and inimitable program of education. Putting his theory into practice, Rousseau also created curated fictional worlds for his readers, writing novels that provided ideal, private, and imagined experiences of socialization. As for education for truth seeking, Rousseau determined that it is best pursued in solitude or exile. Of all the thinkers, he is the only one who reserves some space for education apart from politics.

In chapter four, “Developing Liberal Democrats: Dewey’s Synthesis,” I reveal how Dewey sought to harmonize the apparent tensions between both Plato and Rousseau and between an education for truth and for becoming by generating a democratic theory of education still embraced by contemporary political theorists today. Following Hegel, Dewey maintained that educators need not choose between educating for the individual and educating for society because each could be perfected through the other. Analyzing his conception of education as growth, I show that although Dewey claimed to embrace an idea of education that has no end and is lifelong, he ultimately relied on a necessarily progressive view of education that places excessive, undue hope on the institution of the school. I note that in relegating all education to the service of society, Dewey owed more to Plato than is typically realized. Because he did not adequately recognize the value of individuals understood as separable from their contribution to social progress, he

foreclosed the possibility of any education as a purely private or solitary truth-seeking activity.

In chapter five, “Realizing the Revolution: Freire’s Critical Pedagogy,” I introduce political theorists to Paulo Freire, a pedagogue whose reception in the United States as a founder of critical pedagogy made him a giant in the field of education studies but obscured his contributions to political thought. Whereas Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey each stressed the power and importance of ongoing socialization from childhood, Freire took a different approach, suggesting that one’s interpretation of experience is more important to becoming than the experience itself. Taking adult education as his starting point, Freire suggested that what society needed was not a theory of learning for children, but rather a theory of *unlearning* for adults that would result in concrete action against all oppression in society. Valuing neither stability nor incremental progress, he sought to redefine education as a praxis that prompts critical consciousness and radical change. For Freire, education could never and should never aspire to be neutral. More fervently than even Dewey, he insisted that it is neither possible nor desirable to separate education from socio-politico-economic utility.

My readings of Plato, Rousseau, Dewey, and Freire reveal and critique the foundations of contemporary debates regarding the purpose of education, debates which assume that education is for individual and collective becoming. Against these accounts, I resist dominant conceptions of the self as a product to be made by education. I challenge the conceit that the basic, human desire to learn must be justified in terms of socio-politico-economic utility. In “Living to Learn: An Alternative,” I conclude by defending education for truth seeking apart from projects of individual and collective becoming. I

instead insist on education as an intrinsically valuable practice, to be enjoyed by children but most especially by adults within and outside the boundaries of the school.

To rethink education in this way is to rethink the basic assumptions of political theories that rely on the idea of subjects as fixed entities to be made by education. If political subjects are not the products of a curriculum, but unstable beings who progress and regress, learn and unlearn, then education as it is traditionally conceived cannot be counted on to produce desired outcomes. Instead of focusing on how ideal citizens can be “made,” I argue, political theory should stress how good citizenship is a continuous practice in need of encouragement at all stages of life. Instead of idealizing how education can be reformed and perfected to facilitate political life, theorists should view education itself as a goal of political life.

II

Molding Citizens: Plato's Question

The Greeks had a word for education understood as an individual's becoming. As John M. Cooper defines it, *paideia* is "the ability that is of service to the soul," and so it is a comprehensive and holistic idea that goes beyond one's upbringing alone.³⁹ In this chapter, I offer a rereading of Plato's body of work through the lens of education and show how Plato grappled with the relationship between what I have termed education for truth seeking and education for becoming.⁴⁰ Against common readings, I argue that Plato's Socrates should not be read primarily as a model teacher but rather as a model student who embodies truth-seeking inquiry. In a time when private teachers claimed to hold the key to forming ideal men and citizens, Plato redirected attention to the decisive role of a city's culture and constitution in shaping youth. That is, he suggested that socialization—not transmission or sophistry—is the key mode by which selves and societies become excellent or corrupt.⁴¹ I further demonstrate how Plato considered whether the socialization that determines becoming could be intentionally designed and perfected by the kind of inquiry Socrates models. Can and should truth-seeking inquiry be restricted to serve social interests?

³⁹ Plato, *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Hackett Publishing, 1997), 1686.

⁴⁰ With the exception of Plato's *Republic*, which cites the Bloom translation, all references from the dialogues are from Plato, *Plato: Complete Works*.

⁴¹ In this chapter, "sophistry" is posited as a kind of education as transmission. Plato's idea of "philosophy" is used interchangeably with inquiry, and "true philosophy" is understood as truth-seeking inquiry.

The chapter proceeds as follows: First, I confront the main interpretive difficulties of reading Plato and clarify my approach to his work and to the Socratic problem. I contend that although the lines between Plato, Plato's Socrates and the historical Socrates are impossibly blurry, these figures cannot be conflated. While the historical Socrates influenced and motivated Plato's project, in the dialogues he is less a vehicle for Plato's views than he is a symbol through which education as truth-seeking inquiry or, in Plato's words "true" philosophy, can be explored and revealed as distinguishable from education as transmission, or sophistry.

I then draw on a range of dialogues to argue that Socrates is not really a teacher but rather a special kind of student whose claims of ignorance should not be dismissed outright. I maintain that Socrates' critical symbolic function throughout Plato's work is missed when readers insist on viewing him primarily as a teacher or as a figure who is comparable to other sophists. As a student who *seeks* truth and virtue, he is distinct from the sophists who claim to *teach* truth and virtue. Whereas sophists embrace a distorted form of inquiry which is not truth-seeking but instead self-serving, Socrates exemplifies a kind of "true" philosophy.

Next, I contextualize Plato's emphasis on the free and public nature of Socrates' truth-seeking activities by examining the educational practices and ideals of classical Athens. I argue that Plato's dialogues suggest that a more traditional emphasis on public education results in more virtue than the newer practice of paying private teachers. Plato maintained that the culture and constitution of a society is more educative than teachers and their lessons. Although he deserves to be criticized, the sophist is less the

fundamental cause of corruption than he is a symptom of a larger problem in the culture and constitution of his society.

In the next section, I turn to Plato's *Republic* as both his illustration of this argument and as an inquiry into whether true philosophy or truth-seeking inquiry might be made to guide individual and collective becoming. This is achieved both symbolically at the level of the characters in the dialogue as well as in the content of the dialogue itself. Posing a radically new relationship between philosophy and society, Plato reveals a system where power and truth-seeking inquiry transform one another to the point where each is no longer recognizable.

Finally, I note the ambiguity in Plato's work and life on the desirability of a wholly political vision of education and a wholly educational view of politics. Does the *Republic* suggest that Plato believed that all education, even truth-seeking inquiry, should ultimately serve becoming? What are the costs of this belief? I consider how Plato's founding of the academy and alleged political ambitions only further adds to this puzzle.

The Socratic Problem

Reading Plato on education presents an especially complicated puzzle. Not only do readers face the familiar interpretive challenges that accompany any reading of his work, but the fact that the writings are themselves modeling education means that what is said about education must also be considered in light of how it is being carried out for both the characters and the reader. Plato was born in 428/7 BCE to a wealthy, political family whose members, like him, studied with Socrates.⁴² To read Plato on education is

to read a student who became a teacher depicting his former teacher (who himself refused the name teacher) “teaching” other students, often about education. In this section, I clarify and defend my reading of Plato as a thinker who grappled with the problem of politics and education throughout his life’s work and who used Socrates as a symbolic figure in that exploration.

Many twentieth-century scholars followed Paul Shorey in reading Plato as a figure with settled views who used Socrates to convey his ideas.⁴³ Reconstructing a historical Socrates with his own separate philosophy seemed impossible to these scholars, both because Socrates never wrote and because those who wrote about him, including Plato, Xenophon, Aristophanes, and Aristotle, were inconsistent in their accounts. Moreover, even within Plato’s dialogues, conflicting portraits of Socrates emerge: He appears as a gadfly, a midwife, and (perhaps) a sophist. He appears as political and loyal to his city, as political and critical of the city’s leadership, and as anti-political and above politics.

In other words, even on Plato’s account, Socrates is an enigmatic figure open to interpretation: Is he a man who truly knows nothing, earnestly curious and hoping to learn from others? Is he on a divine mission? Or is he only interested in mocking others, especially those of higher status who believe that they are wise? If he is mocking, what are his motives? Is he simply (perhaps even naively) providing a spectacle for the entertainment of the youth who associate with him? Is Socrates primarily interested in

⁴² Josiah Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens: Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 157.

⁴³ Paul Shorey, *What Plato Said* (University of Chicago Press, 1965).

interrogating arguments and definitions, or in examining people? Is he an arrogant, ironic man interested in persuading reputable citizens (and always failing)? Or is he a humble conversationalist, devoted to the pursuit of understanding and the testing of ideas? And where, among all these possibilities, is Plato?

For some readers, these apparent inconsistencies were simply too numerous to ignore. In 1971, this led analytic philosopher Gregory Vlastos to conclude that Plato's thought had not only developed over time, but that the change was so dramatic that it must represent a break between the views of a historical Socrates and his own.⁴⁴ Vlastos promoted the idea that a Socratic Socrates in the early dialogues gave way to a Platonic Socrates in the later ones. This argument renewed scholarly hope in the possibility of discovering a historical Socrates as a philosopher in his own right, but the notion of a developmental rather than unitarian Plato was not without its problems, and scholars such as Charles H. Kahn continued to defend a more unitarian understanding of Plato.⁴⁵ As John M. Cooper notes, the chronological ordering and division of Plato's dialogues is a largely interpretive and speculative enterprise.⁴⁶ And although scholars can point to some limited evidence and some stylistic and thematic similarities in order to infer some

⁴⁴ Gregory Vlastos, *The Philosophy of Socrates: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Anchor Books, 1980); Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 1 edition (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991).

⁴⁵ See Charles H. Kahn's *Plato and the Post-Socratic Dialogue: The Return to the Philosophy of Nature*, Reprint edition (Cambridge University Press, 2016). Kahn then moderated his claim somewhat in the later *Plato and the Post-Socratic Dialogue* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁴⁶ John M. Cooper, "Introduction," in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. D. S. Hutchinson and John M. Cooper, (Hackett Publishing, 1997), xii–xiv.

groupings between the dialogues, there is simply no way to conclusively determine in what order Plato wrote.

Rejecting both a unitarian, doctrinal Plato who spoke through Socrates and a developmental, doctrinal Plato who increasingly separated himself from Socrates, scholars have increasingly insisted on a third way. As Gerald A. Press notes, an ever-growing consensus has emerged around the idea that Plato is not at all a doctrinal thinker but instead a dramatic one whose dialogues demand a more literary approach.⁴⁷ Press places himself at the vanguard of this movement he calls the “new Platonists,” yet as he acknowledges, Straussians have long approached Plato as a literary thinker and paid close attention to the rhetorical aspects of his work, including the dialogue and setting. Whereas Press and the “new Platonists” insist on taking each dialogue as a self-contained whole that cannot be made representative of either Plato or Socrates’ thought more generally, Straussians tend to read Plato as a more coherent thinker with discernable views.

My Plato is neither developmental nor strictly doctrinal, but one who used his dialogues to both model and wrestle with the limits and possibilities of education in all its forms. As Danielle Allen notes, how we read Plato often depends on whether we think Plato believed in “human nature’s malleability,” but rather than assume or settle on an answer to that question, I propose that it be understood as *the* open question for Plato.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Gerald A. Press, “The State of the Question in the Study of Plato: Twenty Year Update,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 56, no. 1 (March 1, 2018): 9–35.

⁴⁸ Allen, “Platonic Quandaries.”

How and whether individuals and societies can be shaped toward ideals is always both a pedagogical and a political question for Plato.

That this question was central to his thought is supported not only by the way in which it is raised throughout the dialogues themselves, but by what we do know of Plato's life and world. Plato was surrounded by teachers who claimed to teach the youth to become virtuous, and he watched Socrates be sentenced to death on the charge of corrupting them. This question was by no means a settled question in Plato's time, but a live, intellectual one for students and teachers. To take one example, according to the 3rd-century biographer Diogenes Laërtius, one of the seventeen now-lost dialogues by Socrates' friend Crito was titled, "That men are not made good by instruction."⁴⁹

If we understand Plato's dialogues as occasions for raising and exploring this question, then it would be misguided to read them as though they are attempts to merely preserve and transmit what he and/or Socrates thought. The fact that Socrates makes a statement does not in and of itself necessitate that it was his or Plato's view, and in this dissertation, unless specifically noted otherwise, all future references to Socrates are references to Plato's Socrates.

That said, consistent themes and patterns do emerge across the dialogues, and studying Plato on education has a unique advantage: One not only has the content of the "teachings" about education, but the example of education "in action" as well. When taken together and considered in context, Plato's collected works do suggest a consistent picture of his thoughts and doubts on education. The problem with Press' approach and

⁴⁹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, trans. R.D. Hicks, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 2.5.

with any approach that treats Plato's dialogues as completely isolated and self-contained dramas is that, as Catherine Zuckert notes, the dialogues do clearly speak to one another.⁵⁰ For Zuckert, what matters is not when Plato wrote the dialogues, but in what order he would teach them, and this presumably has some relationship to the order of the events depicted in the dialogues. Unlike Zuckert, my reading does not rest on an actual or intended chronology to Plato's works, but like her, I maintain that Plato is revealed in the dramatic, pedagogic whole of his work.

To make sense of Plato on education, one must respect his decision to leave himself out of the dialogues and look beyond the specific arguments of individual characters. One must consider the whole, and no individual dialogue can be taken for the whole. This means that although the *Republic* is commonly and rightly read as a centerpiece in Plato's thought on education, a fuller appreciation of the complexity and ambiguity of his treatment of it requires examining his other dialogues as well.

Ultimately, like Alexander Nehamas, I maintain that Plato's "whole philosophical project" can be understood as "a lifelong struggle to understand Socrates' strange personality," but unlike many scholars, I think Plato was more interested in the *idea* of Socrates than in his actual beliefs.⁵¹ Socrates serves a symbolic function for Plato as the embodiment of the inquiring truth-seeker. In the section that follows, I detail precisely how Socrates represents the mode of inquiry for Plato and how this clarifies why the point of Socrates' difference from the sophists is so frequently raised throughout

⁵⁰ Catherine H. Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers: The Coherence of the Dialogues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁵¹ Nehamas, *Virtues of Authenticity*, xix.

the dialogues. I show how this supports the idea that Plato believed that socialization, not transmission or inquiry, is the key mode of education for becoming.

Education as Sophistry

Despite the significant scholarly disagreement on who Socrates was, one conviction is almost universally shared: that he was a teacher.⁵² Socrates is variously interpreted as a teacher of moral virtue, a teacher of good citizenship, a democratic teacher for all people, an anti-democratic teacher of elites, and a teacher of skepticism. Even Peter J. Euben, who does note that Socrates was uniquely a “student of his students” views Socrates as a teacher, albeit one who teaches reciprocally.⁵³ And Socrates was, after all, Plato’s teacher. But in what sense was Plato’s Socrates really a teacher? And what should we make of all the evidence that shows that at least in his own view, Socrates was *not* a teacher?

The evidence that Socrates was not in fact a teacher comes first and foremost from his own words. Socrates refused to call himself a teacher, and he frequently professed his ignorance. Perhaps his most memorable refusal of the name teacher came at his trial, where in the *Apology* he explicitly states, “I have never been anyone’s teacher,”

⁵² An exception, Alexander Nehamas correctly argues that Socrates was not “a teacher of arete” and more concerned with himself. Alexander Nehamas, “What Did Socrates Teach and to Whom Did He Teach It?,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 46, no. 2 (1992): 284. See also *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (University of California Press, 1998) and *Virtues of Authenticity: Essays on Plato and Socrates* (Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁵³ J. Peter Euben, *Corrupting Youth: Political Education, Democratic Culture, and Political Theory* (Princeton University Press, 1997), 341.

adding, “I cannot justly be held responsible for the good or bad conduct of these people, as I never promised to teach them anything and have not done so” (33a-b). Of course, the conditions under which Socrates makes this claim render it suspect. Having been accused of corrupting the youth with his teachings, denying that he is a teacher at all could simply be a lie in his defense.

That Socrates does not really mean what he says is a very common interpretation of him. There is a long tradition of insisting that Socrates is really a teacher who only asks questions for which he has answers, and many readings, seeking to explain away his professions of ignorance, insist that Socrates is only being ironic. Such readings of Socrates are so old, they are found in the texts themselves. In the *Republic*, Thrasymachus accuses Socrates of being intentionally deceiving and of only feigning ignorance.⁵⁴ He claims that Socrates prefers to do the “easy” work of finding fault with others rather than providing his own answers (336c). He further accuses Socrates of being sarcastic and intentionally deceiving.

As always, Socrates protests that he makes no special claim to knowledge, but Thrasymachus won’t accept his answers. He chides Socrates for being unwilling to teach and yet being willing to learn from others without gratitude, which is to say payment (337e). Socrates replies by insisting that he cannot give an answer when he neither has one nor claims to possess one. In the dialogue *Charmides*, Socrates is once again taken to be someone who only pretends to not have answers. Yet he insists in his reply to Critias, “You are talking to me as though I professed to know the answers to my own

⁵⁴ Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom, 3rd edition (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 336c–337e.

questions and as though I could agree with you if I really wished. This is not the case—rather, because of my own ignorance, I am continually investigating in your company whatever is put forward” (164c).

Why does Plato make Socrates so insistent on his ignorance? Does he not express views in other dialogues? At minimum, does he not have a teaching about the importance of humility and skepticism? While many Straussian interpreters have turned to esotericism as the answer, I offer an alternative explanation: Socrates’ professions of ignorance, which are tied to his refusal to assume the name teacher, are meant to highlight that he is a strange kind of student, not a teacher, and that his activities are therefore distinguishable from sophistry. That is, if the sophists are teachers who claim to offer a certain kind of teachable knowledge, Socrates is a student who seeks truth—a special kind of student because the truth he seeks is its own good. Although recent scholarship has insisted on strong affinities between Socrates and the sophists, I maintain that Plato is deeply invested in distinguishing them.⁵⁵

As Socrates describes it, one of the key points of contrast between himself and the sophists is this refusal to treat his educational activity as a commodity that he (a “teacher”) can or should sell to a student. In the *Sophist*, the sophist is described as “a hired hunter of rich young men,” “a wholesaler of learning about the soul,” “a retailer of the same things,” and “a seller of his own learning” (231-232). Whereas the sophists are engaged in the “business” of education, Socrates never promises excellence in exchange for fees. As he stresses three separate times in the *Apology*, he does not sell any teaching

⁵⁵ David D. Corey, *The Sophists in Plato’s Dialogues* (SUNY Press, 2015).

at all (19e, 31b, 33b). His conversation is not dependent on receiving a fee, and he is “equally ready to question the rich and the poor” who are willing to engage him (33a-b). Emphasizing this point was Socrates’ way of insisting that whatever education he could be said to offer, it was a public one, not a private one.

Above all, the sophist is both “an athlete in verbal combat, distinguished by his expertise in debating,” and one who “appears to have expert knowledge of lots of things” (*Sophist*, 232). Socrates, by contrast, insists he has no expert knowledge. Rather, he consistently affirms his position as a student, referring to himself as a “lover of inquiry” who “must follow his beloved wherever it may lead him” (*Euthyphro*, 14c). In the *Lesser Hippias*, he further describes his activity as follows:

It is always my custom to pay attention when someone is saying something, especially when the speaker seems to me to be wise. And because I desire to learn what he means, I question him thoroughly and examine and place side-by-side the things he says, so I can learn. If the speaker seems to me to be some worthless person, I neither ask questions nor do I care what he says. This is how you’ll recognize whom I consider wise. You’ll find me being persistent about what’s said by this sort of person, questioning him so that I can benefit by learning something. (369d-e)

Whereas the sophists have nothing to learn from their clients and refutations—they are, after all, charging a fee for wisdom they already possess, Socrates genuinely seeks to learn and desires to find truth, having at first sought truth in the natural world and later turned his inquiry toward human things.⁵⁶

For the most cynical reader, Socrates’ words to someone like Hippias are simply flattery: He is not really expecting to learn something, only sweetening Hippias with the suggestion that his challenge is actually a sign of his respect for Hippias’ wisdom. And

⁵⁶ For a discussion of Socrates’ turn, see Strauss (1966), Zuckert (2004), Sebell (2016).

indeed, Socrates often does present a skeptical, quasi-mocking attitude toward his interlocutors, at times speaking with a deference that reads as exaggerated or disingenuous. But this manner of responding to the ego and self-certainty of his interlocutors is only proof that Socrates is a special kind of student. He genuinely wants to learn, but he is not the kind of student who is naively ready to absorb whatever teachings someone has to offer.

In other words, Socrates models a discriminating student whose true belief in his own ignorance and love of learning is accompanied by a discriminating sense of whether he truly has something to learn from his interlocutors. In *Theaetetus*, Socrates likens this ability to being able to tell whether someone is “pregnant” with some truth or untruth. Like a midwife who is “barren of wisdom;” he teaches nothing but helps others “discover within themselves a multitude of beautiful things, which they bring forth into the light” (*Theaetetus* 150e). Unlike the sophist who will engage with anyone willing to pay and who are often concerned with the “great clashing of argument on argument,” Socrates is only interested in associating with those who will bring to light what is true or untrue (*Theaetetus* 154e). This is why when Socrates realizes that someone is not “pregnant” with some truth, Socrates “with the best will in the world,” will not further engage the person and will send them to someone else (*Theaetetus*, 151b). While his actions may benefit his interlocutor, Socrates’ motivation is ultimately selfish. This is one of the reasons why he never offers a fee: The learning Socrates might gain is its own reward.

Of course, more often than not, Socratic elenchus resulted in aporia. But as a visitor explains to Theaetetus in the *Sophist*, when employed correctly, the method of refutation provides a cleansing experience that removes the roadblocks that prevent

further learning, clearing the soul of arrogance in order to open it toward inquiry.

Whereas Socrates employs the method as someone who genuinely searches his examinee for truth, the sophist who employs refutation is only interested in winning and appearing wiser. That is, Socrates examines, but the sophist is only interested in refutation for the sake of his vanity. The sophist appears to have “a kind of belief-knowledge about everything,” but in fact does not possess a “just love of wisdom” and only sells the appearance of truth (*Sophist*, 232d-233d).

When Socrates does pose arguments of his own, he does so as a fellow student seeking truth; he seeks partners in inquiry, not youths to shape and mold with some teaching. Whatever improvement the student shows is not “due to anything they have learned from [him],” but to what was already inside themselves (*Theaetetus*, 150e). By comparison, the sophist promises to make the child into a good person and citizen, as though that were the same as teaching someone a skill or a trade. For the right fee, sophists claim, young boys can become excellent, virtuous men. In other words, sophists promise to provide an education for becoming ideal men and citizens. Their answer to one of the central questions raised in the *Apology*—whether teachers can intentionally make students virtuous or corrupt through their teachings—is yes.

But Socrates consistently denies his own ability to do this and his disinterest in it. Socrates does not want to shape youth, but to arrive somehow closer to truth. In the *Symposium*, not even his beloved Alcibiades can convince Socrates to “teach” him to be good. When he offers himself to Socrates one night saying, “Nothing is more important to me than becoming the best man I can be, and no one can help me more than you to

reach that aim” (*Symposium*, 218d), Socrates refuses him.⁵⁷ As he points out to Alcibiades, if Socrates really does possess some great truth, then the trade he is proposing is hardly worth his while. Socrates has no interest in money or sex, only in truth that Alcibiades cannot offer him.

Socrates is not only determined that he does not have the expertise required to teach virtue, he is skeptical of anyone who claims to possess it. In the *Meno* and *Protagoras*, two dialogues which deal explicitly with the question of whether virtue can be taught, Socrates points to the number of virtuous men who have failed to teach their own sons to be virtuous citizens like them. And, in the *Gorgias*, he notes how often those who “claim to be teachers of excellence [...] frequently accuse their students of doing them wrong, depriving them of their fees and withholding other forms of thanks from them, even though the students have been well-served by them” (519c-d). He rightly wonders: If their students really benefited from them and were made good and just, how can this be the case?

And yet, at times it does seem that Socrates believes that sophists really do have significant power to shape (or at least misshape) through their teachings, helping the soul or making it sick through what they sell. In *Protagoras*, Socrates offers a warning to his friend Hippocrates about the sophists. He tells him that education is an “entrusting of the soul,” and while the soul is nourished by learning, buying teachings is risky because the seller will sell anything to anyone for the right price (313). Teachings are not necessarily

⁵⁷ Weiss (2019) points out that this is evidence of another form of payment Socrates refuses to accept and further proof of his goodness. She is one of many scholars who read Socrates primarily as a teacher of virtue.

good, and only “knowledgeable consumer[s] [...] can buy teachings safely” (314). Here, Socrates suggests what he practices, urging that Hippocrates be, like him, a skeptical and discerning student. Socrates’ point was never that no one has anything to teach or that it is wrong to learn things from others; in fact, in *Theaetetus* Socrates admits he often plays “matchmaker” for students whom he thinks might profit from those who offer what he does not (151b). The problem is that teachers will sell anything, including that which they cannot teach, and students must buy responsibly. Students must be careful to distinguish between rhetoric and persuasion and true education.

For this reason, when the pair meets Protagoras, a self-proclaimed sophist, they set out to learn exactly what it is he sells. Protagoras tells Hippocrates, “The very day you start, you will go home a better man, and the same thing will happen the day after. Every day, day after day, you will get better and better.” (*Protagoras*, 318b). Pressed for details, he adds that he will teach one “how to realize one’s maximum potential for success in political debate and action,” or, as Socrates puts it, “the art of citizenship” (319). Socrates expresses surprise that this would be considered teachable. Protagoras goes on to explain that everyone is a teacher of virtue, having a share in it and teaching it to each other. At the same time, some people (like himself) are better than others in virtue and are therefore capable of teaching it. But when they try to determine what virtue actually is, each ends up arguing the opposite position regarding its teachability, and the dialogue ends unresolved, suggesting further inquiry is needed. The dialogue also sharply juxtaposes two models of education; Protagoras prefers stories and long speeches which allow him to simply transmit a teaching or argument, and Socrates prefers his usual

method of question and answer. Only the latter uncovers the inadequacy of the truth supposedly revealed through teachings.

One of the suggestions made in *Protagoras*, and a point Socrates insists on in the *Apology*, is that becoming a virtuous citizen is determined by socialization, not transmission. Moreover, everyone has a responsibility, at all ages, to seek virtue. It is not something only children need to learn. This becomes clear in *Laches*, where Socrates is invited to weigh in on whether Lysimachus should pay for his son to be trained in courage. He notes that he himself longed for such an education in virtue since youth, but he could not afford to pay any sophists, “who were the only ones who professed to be able to make a cultivated man of me” (186c). He proposes that they see if any among them possess the expertise they hope to instill in the boys. His interlocutors, Laches and Nicias, are reputable generals, and yet it becomes clear that they can neither point to where they learned courage from and that they do not actually have any knowledge of it. Rather than end the dialogue with the conclusion that it simply cannot be learned, Socrates exhorts them all (including himself) to continue inquiring into courage by finding others to learn from, even though they are no longer boys.

For Socrates, forming good citizens is something the entire community should be invested in doing together for free, and at all ages. In the *Apology*, Socrates makes the case that only the city, not any one individual, may be held responsible for the excellence or corruption of its youth. His defense suggests that youth are more powerfully (mis)shaped and influenced by Athenian society, not teachers. Moreover, he thinks it ludicrous that students would seek (and pay) professional teachers to learn about virtue when a free education is readily available from interacting with their fellow citizens. He

laments that sophists “persuade the young, who can keep company with anyone of their own fellow citizens they want without paying, to leave the company of these, to join with themselves, pay them a fee, and be grateful to them besides” (20). Becoming a virtuous citizen occurs through interaction with other virtuous citizens: If the youth lack virtue, the citizens should examine themselves, their culture, and their constitution.

That said, if people are formed by socialization, then can it not be concluded that teachers do shape after all via their interactions with students? While Socrates did not intentionally teach anything or corrupt the youth, he admits in the *Apology* and *Euthyphro* that some did take it upon themselves to imitate him, albeit incorrectly. This phenomenon of young people misusing philosophy and “treating it as a kind of game of contradiction” is raised in the *Republic* (538d-539c) and is perhaps the clearest concession of Socrates’ unintentional guilt. But should he be held responsible for another’s choice to imitate him? Can he be blamed for who his associates became? Who can justly be held responsible for the state of the youth?

Education as Socialization

Although Plato is often read as the enemy of tradition, it is important to note that his emphasis on the free and public nature of Socrates’ truth-seeking activities is consistent with the more traditional emphasis on public education that characterized classical Athens alongside the elite practice of paying private teachers. Sophists claimed to “make” their students better for a price, but Athenians already had a complex system in place for making their children into ideal adults. This was accomplished through a system of law, culture, and institutions that guided children through demarcated stages. Plato’s

dialogues reflect the belief that this is in fact how good citizens are made: not by teachers and their lessons, but by the culture and constitution that mediates their relations with others.

Greek children underwent a phased and gradual transition from birth to adult citizenship, and these were not private, individual affairs but marked by increasingly public initiations experienced together with those in one's age class.⁵⁸ The first of these stages occurred when the new baby had to first be accepted into the family by his father. At around the age of three, boys participated in the *Choes* or "Pitchers" feast which occurred during the *Anthesteria* festival.⁵⁹ This involved having the child receive a small jug and sample of wine, and it served as a first step outside the household for the infant now transitioning to childhood.

Then, at around six, privileged children were introduced to a new male figure: a *paidagogos* or "child-leader" who would serve as a combination of "nurse, footman, chaperon, and tutor" for the child.⁶⁰ This person, a slave, would accompany the child to primary school, which would usually begin the following year. For the wealthy, schooling began earlier and ended later, and at school children encountered a continued stress on discipline, order, and good behavior.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Robertson, Bruce, "The Scrutiny of New Citizens at Court," in *Law and Social Status in Classical Athens*, ed. Virginia J. Hunter and J. C. Edmondson (Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁵⁹ Barry Strauss, *Fathers and Sons in Athens* (London, US: Routledge, 2002), 91.

⁶⁰ Strauss, 91.

⁶¹ Mark Golden, *Children and Childhood in Classical Athens* (JHU Press, 2015), 64.

Children also went on to engage in new forms of controlled socialization as they grew. The choruses, for example, were divided by tribe (a militaristic rather than geographic entity) and provided children with the opportunity to meet fellow tribesmen from across the *polis*.⁶² Other activities, such as sports, granted a space for competitive outlets through which children might begin to distinguish themselves as individuals capable of impressing others. In general, the stage of adolescence, from the onset of puberty until about eighteen, was a time of further growth and sexual experiences, including participation in relationships with older males in the supposedly educative practice of pederasty.

When a child reached puberty, he began to attract the attention of older men who would try to win over his affections. Sexualized and idealized, adolescents were expected to respond to these pursuits with passivity, modesty, and disinterest. When the relationship was finally consummated, the boy was “required to yield passively to his lover and ideally derive no sexual gratification himself.”⁶³ Boys were expected to allow the feelings of their pursuers to be tested by time. If the *eros* of the *erastes* (man) for the *eromenos* (boy) were truly pure, it would prove itself in the end. Being “caught quickly” was therefore considered “disgraceful,” as was yielding in response to offers of money or political influence.⁶⁴ Such offers, it was believed, should be rejected outright, lest they reduce the relationship to prostitution. The difference, though, may not have always been

⁶² Golden, 65–67.

⁶³ Lesley A. Beaumont, *Childhood in Ancient Athens: Iconography and Social History* (Routledge, 2013), 203.

⁶⁴ Kenneth James Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Harvard University Press, 1989).

so clear: As a “habit of the upper class and of those who imitated them,” such relationships naturally led to material and political privileges.⁶⁵

At the same time, pederasty was believed to provide other kinds of benefits for the boy: through these relationships he was given access to “an older member of the citizen elite” who would act as a role model for “appropriate attitudes and behavior” while also offering wisdom.⁶⁶ In other words, pederasty gave boys a mentor who was closer in age and could guide them through the last phase of childhood and into adulthood. These relationships were not pursued in private—pederasty was a kind of public competition that often began at the gymnasium and continued at the symposia, or private political clubs to which boys might be invited to attend. As such, there was an inevitable way in which a beloved “caught” boy was a kind of trophy for the man.

Childhood had a specific, supervised structure with key points of introduction to society. It was only when the youth reached their eighteenth year that they became eligible to join their *demes* as registered members, provided both of their parents were Athenian citizens. This event, called the *dokimasia*, once again subjected the youth to the judgment and acceptance of his elders, but with greater consequences at stake: access to citizenship.⁶⁷

Aristotle describes how at the *dokimasia* each *deme* would vote on one of three options: (1) to admit the youth as a free man born “born as prescribed by the laws” and of

⁶⁵ Walter Kirkpatrick Lacey, *The Family in Classical Greece* (Cornell University Press, 1968), 158.

⁶⁶ Golden, *Children and Childhood in Classical Athens*, 59.

⁶⁷ Robertson, Bruce, “The Scrutiny of New Citizens at Court,” 149.

age to become a citizen, (2) to determine the youth was not yet of age (but otherwise qualified) and therefore to be “return[ed] to the ranks of the boys,” on oath, and (3) to reject the youth on the grounds that he is not free.⁶⁸ In the third case, the youth would have the option to appeal the decision in the court in order to win admittance. If he lost the appeal, he would face being sold as a slave. If accepted, an animal was sacrificed and the boy’s hair was symbolically cut.⁶⁹

The fact that youths could be deemed free but sent back as underage illustrates how to be “of age” was not a status one naturally came to acquire after a certain amount of time. Instead, it was dependent upon the judgment of others.⁷⁰ The relative fluidity of age is further supported by evidence from age classes at athletic competitions, which were relatively subjective.⁷¹ Because age was decided by class year, all children of the same class year were considered to be more or less the same age. The concept of age was therefore not as objective or precisely measured as it is today. Instead, it was understood that not every child underwent the same rate of development, and this was especially true with respect to the body. This was significant because in determining when childhood had ended, it was the state of one’s bodily development that took precedence over intellectual capacity and growth.⁷²

⁶⁸ Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution*, ch. 42.

⁶⁹ Lawton, Carol L., “Children in Classical Attic Votive Reliefs,” in *Constructions of Childhood in Ancient Greece and Italy*, ed. Ada Cohen and Jeremy B. Rutter (ASCSA, 2007), 57.

⁷⁰ Robertson, Bruce, “The Scrutiny of New Citizens at Court,” 153.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

Classical archeologist Lesley Beaumont has further observed that it was not only in terms of age that boys inched forward toward full citizenship, but also in terms of gender, or maleness.⁷³ Boys began at “a genderless state at birth and infancy,” and progressed “via an older childhood stage of combined male and female traits, to an adolescent phase that gave heightened expression to his mixed gender profile.”⁷⁴ True manliness, not just full citizenship, came with adulthood, and maleness was something that had to be judged and proven with bodily evidence.

After the scrutiny, Aristotle explains that fathers were empowered to select, by tribe, three members over the age of forty whom they judged to be “the best and most suitable to take charge of the cadets.”⁷⁵ Of the three approved, the people of each tribe then elected one man as their tribe’s *sophonistes*. The whole citizenry would also elect a single supreme commander to head the entire class of cadets along with the other officers. Each class was assigned to one of forty-two heroes, such that all politically active citizens, those aged eighteen through sixty, had a hero assigned.⁷⁶

The initial years of the youth’s transition to full citizenship, then, were occupied with fulfilling the requirement to participate in military training and service known as the *epheboi*. Aristotle describes how this process involved touring, performing guard duties, and undergoing training with instructors in infantry fighting, archery, javelin-throwing

⁷² Ibid., 169.

⁷³ Beaumont, *Childhood in Ancient Athens*.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 200.

⁷⁵ Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution*, ch. 53.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

and catapult firing.⁷⁷ Cadets, supported by the state, ate with their fellow tribesmen and eventually demonstrated what they had learned in an assembly at which the state awarded them a spear and shield. This ceremony marked the conclusion of yet another predetermined stage through which citizens had to pass.

Aristotle also tells us that youth were not only required to focus on military training and service as guardsmen, but that they were deliberately relieved of all citizen responsibilities and barred from participating in any lawsuits as either a prosecutor or defendant. Exceptions were only made for inheritance-related cases or for those that have inherited priesthods. And so, while technically citizens, the recently initiated had a very limited role in politics.

Even after fulfilling military service requirements, age limits still placed additional restrictions on the ability of young men to participate in political life. Power was reserved for the older generation through legal boundaries that kept men in hierarchal, age-based divisions. In this way, set “stages” continued to dictate the status of the younger generation. One’s development and participation in the *polis* increased in phases that privileged those who were older.

Examples of restrictions for adult citizens include the fact that certain offices were reserved for men over thirty years of age, and the fact only those men who were in the last class year, or sixty years old, could be arbitrators. Through the fourth century, only citizens over thirty could be “a juror in the People’s court (*dikastes*) or a legislator

⁷⁷ Ibid.

(*nomothetes*) or a magistrate (*arche*).⁷⁸ Since most men married at around thirty, it was only then, after they had become fathers, were the heads of their household, and were participating in the assembly, that they reached a mature stage of citizenship that came with increased respect and opportunities for political participation.⁷⁹

This, then, was how Athenian babies became adult citizens. But, as classical historian Barry Strauss argues, the decade of Plato's birth was a particularly unique period that resulted in a clear generation gap. On his account, the emboldening power of increased wealth combined with the rise of sophistic education in the context of the Peloponnesian War, and this "freed the young to parade their power without inhibition or modesty."⁸⁰ The young hero was hailed over the "patrios politeia," or the "ancestral, traditional, and paternal constitution."⁸¹ Rhetoric, he adds, further gave the youth a new way to question authority, and supported the "aggressive pursuit of a political career in one's twenties, which the older generation had considered to be too early an age."⁸² Eventually, events such as the sacrilegious performance of the Eleusinian Mysteries and the failed Sicilian Expedition of 415 all negatively implicated youth and began to be interpreted as conspiratorial in nature and evidence of the "dangers of youthful excess."⁸³

⁷⁸ Mogens Herman Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes: Structure, Principles, and Ideology* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 89.

⁷⁹ Golden, *Children and Childhood in Classical Athens*, 109.

⁸⁰ Strauss, *Fathers and Sons in Athens*, 5.

⁸¹ Strauss, 16.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 138.

⁸³ Strauss, 16.

Soon enough, these worries proved not unfounded. But after this period, Strauss argues, the pendulum swung back against the youth in favor of the ancestral and paternal. This swing eventually led to the trial and death of Socrates whose alleged impiety and association with the youth was viewed as the source of their corruption.

That Plato was on the side of protecting certain ancestral and paternal ideas of education may seem unlikely to those who view him as a champion of philosophy against traditional religious and cultural authorities. Plato was, after all, taught by Socrates and related to this corrupted youth who rebelled; and he did find fault with religious and cultural authorities. But as I will demonstrate, this overlooks important complicating evidence. To take just one example, in the dialogue *Euthyphro*, Socrates has been accused of impiety when he encounters a youth doing the unthinkable—persecuting his own father for murder. Both his actions and his father’s actions are considered impious, but since Euthyphro seems to have some special wisdom enabling him to decide that he must bear witness against his father, Socrates engages him.⁸⁴ Euthyphro tires of the conversation, and they fail to discover what piety is, but it does become clear that the source of Euthyphro’s convictions is a story about the gods, the same story Socrates recommends censoring in constructing an ideal city in the *Republic*. The story in question is one which appears to validate rebelling against paternal authority. Euthyphro tells Socrates that the Athenians:

⁸⁴ Notably, as the conversation unfolds, Socrates clearly has the superior mind, but what makes it superior is the fact that he is instinctively thoughtful and relentless in his questioning. Socrates is not attempting to indoctrinate his interlocuter; the inquiry is a joint enterprise. Even when he does not agree with him, Socrates engages seriously with Euthyphro’s statements and beliefs. He appears much more interested in thinking with someone than in “teaching” as it is conventionally understood.

[...] believe that Zeus is the best and most just of the gods, yet they agree that he bound his father because he unjustly swallowed his sons, and that he in turn castrated his father for similar reasons. But they are angry with me because I am prosecuting my father for his wrongdoing. They contradict themselves in what they say about the gods and about me. (6)

In this dialogue, Plato offers a critique of religious authority, but in service of protecting paternal authority. He further demonstrates that the source of Euthyphro's corruption is not Socrates. Euthyphro's actions—horrible to the traditional Athenian—result because something wrong in the culture combined with something wrong in the law to make it possible.

Plato's conviction that a society's constitution and culture are the educative forces that determine becoming is again reinforced in *Crito*. There, a convicted Socrates portrays himself as a product of democratic Athens who owes his freedom to the city. Perhaps most telling is Socrates' impassive response to Crito's attempt to use his children in order to persuade him to escape. Crito argues, "I think you are betraying your sons by going away and leaving them, when you could bring them up and educate them. [...]" Either one should not have children, or one should share with them to the end the toil of upbringing and education" (45d). But Socrates counters that the city is what truly educates and forms a person, not any individual parent or teacher. Socrates deems it better to have his children be properly educated by his city, its laws, and his friends than to have them shaped by a foreign community that did not share his values (54). Without his community, he would not be able to raise his children as he wished because he would not be able to socialize them in the environment he knows and deems best. Here, Plato makes what looks like an abdication of paternal authority into the assertion that the community is the true parent of himself and his children.

Plato sees the law as an educator, but he is careful to warn against an excessively prescriptive law. In the dialogue the *Statesman*, laws are deemed inflexible and insensitive to differences between people because they treat all people equally. They are like “some self-willed and ignorant person, who allows no one to do anything contrary to what he orders, nor to ask any questions about it, not even if, after all, something new turns out for someone which is better, contrary to the prescription which he himself has laid down” (294c).⁸⁵ While Plato believed that people are the “products” of socialization, he knew that evidently, the same law yields many different persons.

That is, society may shape raw material, but not all raw material is alike. Moreover, this “raw material” is alive—people can assess and respond to their environment, and they do so in different ways, a fact he thought could be attributed to nature. Nonetheless, the good legislator will ensure the law provides the basic structure and direction for education, leaving the details to the educators. The ideal statesman will “lay down prescriptions for the educators and direct them, in the same way that weaving follows along with the carders, and those who prepare the other things it needs for its own work, prescribing for and directing them, giving indications to each group to finish their products in whatever way it thinks suitable for its own interweaving” (308d-e). Law should direct education toward its needs and ends by carefully sorting people into groups

⁸⁵ Notably, the written word is said to have these same defects. Socrates famously criticizes writing in the *Phaedrus* for “reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn’t know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not. And when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father’s support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support” (275e).

and balancing them, ensuring that all groups are harmoniously interwoven with the right social bonds.

In other words, Plato continues to reinforce the idea that it is not any one person that determines becoming—not even an individual father—but rather, socialization. Therefore, becoming ideal selves and societies hinges on understanding law and culture in educative terms. The true art of education is not found among professional teachers, but in politics, and more specifically, among political founders and legislators. This leads to a central question for Plato: What if, designed to account for differences in nature, education as socialization could be regulated and controlled to produce a desired outcome—to make ideal citizens?

Molding the Citizen

Plato attempts to answer this question in the *Republic*, and in order to fully appreciate the richness of his answer, one must look to both the characters in the dialogue and its dramatic elements as well as the content of the arguments presented. The dialogue begins with Socrates being coerced by Polemarchus and his friends to keep company with them after a festival. They go to the house of Cephalus, Polemarchus' father, and a conversation ensues. Socrates asks Cephalus about how he is finding his old age, and Cephalus offers a response that leads to the topic of justice.

According to Leo Strauss' reading, Cephalus is introduced in order to be dismissed. He represents a "radically deficient" idea of justice and "the origin of the present disorder," and he must be replaced by Socrates so that philosophy can take the

place of the paternal and ancestral.⁸⁶ Peter J. Steinberger makes a similar point in his extended treatment of the subject when he suggests that the opening is a means of highlighting Polemarchus' "newfound dominion" in accordance with the generational conflict of the time.⁸⁷ And, Jacob Howland also reads Cephalus as a failed model, harshly arguing that "in name as well as nature, Cephalus points downward toward the lowest cave-dwellers."⁸⁸ Cephalus is read as selfish, materialistic, and only interested in his soul because he is close to death.

But, as I have shown, Plato's view of paternal and ancestral authority is not so simple. And in fact, the reason for his banishment is not so clearly tied to the content of his beliefs. On close reading, Cephalus actually possesses a wisdom very much in line with what Socrates goes on to argue for in the *Republic*. First, Cephalus says that the oft-held view that old age is the source of great suffering does not seem right to him since some find old age to be a blessing that frees them from their baser desires. Rather, the source of suffering in old age, as well as in youth, it seems, is failing to live well; that is, failing to be "orderly and content" (329d). As we come to learn, this is very much Socrates' position.

Socrates then replies that most people must respond to Cephalus with incredulity, thinking that the real reason he bears old age well is because he is wealthy. And while Cephalus does not deny that being wealthy is an advantage (it is easier to be rich and just

⁸⁶ Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (University of Chicago Press, 1978), 65.

⁸⁷ Peter J. Steinberger, "Who Is Cephalus?," *Political Theory* 24, no. 2 (1996): 177.

⁸⁸ Jacob Howland, *The Republic: The Odyssey of Philosophy* (Paul Dry Books, 2004), 83.

than it is to be poor and just), he maintains that this view is incorrect. When he looks back on his life, it is not the goods he was able to attain with his wealth that matter to him, but whether he was good and how he will be judged. Wealth is only really a good thing, he asserts, for those who are good and orderly, as they will use it well. That is, it will help them both in doing just actions like paying back their friends and avoiding unjust actions like lying and cheating out of necessity.

It is not Cephalus who suggests that justice is *simply* speaking the truth and paying one's debts; in fact, Cephalus agrees with Socrates that it is not when asked. These are actions related to justice, but they are not justice itself. It is Polemarchus who suddenly bursts into the conversation wrongly asserting that justice is a matter of following simple rules like telling the truth and paying one's debts. The opening problem of the *Republic* is not Cephalus' wrong conception of justice and the authority he represents, but rather Polemarchus, the son who has failed to grasp the wisdom of his father. And so, when Plato removes Cephalus from the dialogue it is not because he is wrong about justice, but because he has failed to educate his son. The extent of his miseducation is further revealed by Socrates' questioning, and by then Plato has already made two points: that neither fathers nor poets can be trusted to educate the youth.

The next to enter the conversation is Thrasymachus, the professional teacher who represents the third and final educator to be dismissed. In his conversation with the sophist, there are two critical moments. The first occurs when Socrates insists on a distinction between any given craft and wage-earning in order to show that when one removes the incentives of honor and wealth, ruling is really about the benefit of the ruled. The second occurs when Socrates insists that "the man who is both good and wise will

not want to get the better of the like, but of the unlike and the opposite,” whereas “the bad and unlearned will want to get the better of both the like and the opposite” (350b).

Shortly thereafter, Thrasymachus blushes, and the tone of the conversation shifts.

Why does Thrasymachus blush? Because Socrates has called him out: First, as one who is not a true teacher, and second, as one who is unlearned and unjust. For, if Thrasymachus was a true teacher, he would teach for the true good of the students, and not so that he and they could obtain wealth and honor. And, if he were truly wise and knew what justice was, he would not be trying to outdo Socrates but cooperating with him. After their exchange is finished, Thrasymachus is chastened and no longer Socrates' enemy. Note that as with Cephalus and the poets, Thrasymachus also had something right in his answer when he turned the conversation toward the idea of law and rule. And yet, each would-be teacher failed, and just as the truth-loving philosopher king is forced to rule, Socrates is forced to teach lest teaching be left in the hands of fathers, poets, and sophists.

The sacrifice that truth-seeking education must make in service of education for becoming is evident in the way that in the remainder of the dialogue Socrates becomes more didactic and less inquiring. Socrates the special kind of student is coerced into the role of a new kind of teacher. Although it is no longer the same kind of dialogue as the others, the form remains. Notably, rather than simply present it to the reader, Plato makes Socrates a narrator, further stressing his new role. The dialogue form creates an experience of socialization carefully structured by Plato, the rational, truth-loving philosopher. Like the drama, it mimics the socialization of real life for the reader and allows for the experience of all three modes of education. The reader can be a student

receiving the teachings of others (including sophists), she can be part of a number of social spaces—from a courtroom to a drinking party—and she can be prompted to inquiry and self-examination through careful study of the text. The key difference, Plato would likely argue, is that his dialogues are ruled by philosophy and written in the interest of genuine truth.

Turning to Socrates' arguments in the dialogue, familiar claims repeat themselves: Both the ideal city and the ideal man are the result of right education, and right education comes through proper socialization guided by reason. Education is a powerful political tool because it is the means by which “a single newly finished person, who is either good or the opposite” can be created (425c). Beginning with a fresh generation of children, Socrates posits that like clay which hardens with age, children are moldable and shapeable at first, but eventually become fixed: “The young can't distinguish what is allegorical from what isn't, and the opinions they absorb at that age are hard to erase and apt to become unalterable” (378d). Young children are the most vulnerable to the effects of socialization, which is why we must “supervise the storytellers” (53). Their souls are like sponges that will absorb what they hear, and they hold on to whatever they were exposed to in youth. Much of that absorption happens through imitation: “Imitations practiced from youth become part of nature and settle into habits of gesture, voice, and thought,” and so children must be given proper examples to mimic and model themselves after (395d). Guardians “must imitate from childhood what is appropriate for them, namely, people who are courageous, self-controlled, pious, and free, and their actions” (395c). Naturally, the more beautiful the stories, the more beautiful the souls are likely to become.

Moreover, the body and soul must be properly shaped through physical training and the arts. Music and poetry play a particularly important role in moral development by encouraging an instinctual, positive response to harmony, order, and moderation. Ideally, there should be a balance: If he who works hard at physical training “does nothing else and never associates with the Muse [...] whatever love of learning he might have had in his soul soon become[s] enfeebled, deaf, and blind, because he never tastes any learning or investigation or partakes of any discussion or any of the rest of music and poetry, to nurture or arouse it” (411d). Conversely, “the person who achieves the finest blend of music and physical training and impresses it on his soul in the most measured way is the one we’d most correctly call completely harmonious and trained in music, much more so than the one who merely harmonizes the strings of his instrument” (412). The result of this balance is a fully formed and harmonized class of citizens ready to serve its purpose in the city.

Education is not “putting sight into blind eyes,” rather, Socrates states that “the sight is already there;” it just “isn’t turned the right way or looking where it ought to look” (518c). As Allan Bloom put it, the goal is not to transmit knowledge but “to change their desires, thereby turning them around from the pursuit of what they falsely believe to be happiness to the pursuit of true happiness” (528b-519d). It is this turn that eventually results in the virtuous citizen and philosopher-king. In the Kallipolis, the only way to achieve this state is through a lifetime of being socialized in the right environment.

Socializing youth into ideal citizens involves the preservation and practice of a common culture, which demands that the Kallipolis be non-neutral toward family, religion, the arts, and culture. It also involves the sorting and training of individuals into

social, political, and economic functions. Different students are best suited to different disciplines and career paths because they are suited to different functions by nature and respond differently to the same curriculum. The “better” students with “better” natures merit a “better” education, as they are the ones who will be chosen to rule. This will ensure steady progress, since “Good education and upbringing, when they are preserved, produce good natures, and useful natures, who are in turn well educated, grow up even better than their predecessors, both in their offspring and in other respects, just like other animals” (424b). The entire system is bolstered by a belief that resulting inequities in power are justified by nature and merit.⁸⁹

And yet, “best” is not simply aptitude for learning, but self-control and dedication to the city. More education is given to those who have been tested and determined least likely to misuse it. The most elite enjoy a kind of education as inquiry for the sake of truth and understanding, but they are given this privilege because they have proven to be most loyal to the city and it is safest in their hands. In this way, education—and

⁸⁹ The idea of Socrates endorsing an elite class of “wise” rulers may seem at odds with the Socrates who, guided by his daemon, insists on examining and unmasking all those who claim to possess wisdom that they do not in fact possess. And yet, Socrates states that “surely the love of learning is the same thing as philosophy or the love of wisdom?” (376b) Those who most love to learn are often precisely those who know their own ignorance. They love wisdom even if they do not or cannot possess it themselves. Socrates himself is a case-in-point: the perpetual student claiming perpetual ignorance. Those who dismiss Socrates’ disavowals of knowledge ignore the extent to which he was genuinely uninterested in teaching others. Even when Socrates appears to be teaching didactically, he is really learning with them, a fact reinforced by the dialogue form. Moreover, if Socrates is lying, Plato certainly goes to great lengths to explain Socrates’ disavowals of wisdom. In *Theaetetus*, he explains it as part of his method as a midwife (157d), and in the *Symposium* he insists, “my own wisdom is of no account—a shadow in a dream” (175e).

especially education as inquiry—is chastened; it serves the city. Education in all its forms is designed and exists for the sake and good of the city.

Identifying the best—those who will ultimately be selected to rule—requires constant testing and monitoring as students are molded and forged. Soldiers are selected for their ability to absorb and keep their lessons in a process that is likened to dying wool purple (429d-430b). This selects for intellectual ability, but those who are deemed the most successful products of their education are those who “upon examination, seem most of all to believe throughout their lives that they must eagerly pursue what is advantageous to the city and be wholly unwilling to do the opposite” (412e). Recognizing the unpredictability of socialization and the distinction between this and education as teaching and learning, Socrates notes that the belief in putting the community before oneself is not like a skill that can be taught and never forgotten. This belief may be abandoned “voluntarily” or “involuntary”—they “may be persuaded to minds or [...] forget,” perhaps due to having experienced “pain or suffering” (413b). They may also “change their mind because they are under the spell of pleasure or fear” (413c). In order to discover whether or not the student has truly and permanently internalized this belief, he must be constantly and actively enticed to abandon his conviction throughout his development; he must be tested “more thoroughly than gold is tested by fire”:

If someone is hard to put under a spell, is apparently gracious in everything, is a good guardian of himself and the music and poetry he has learned, and if he always shows himself to be rhythmical and harmonious, then he is the best person for both himself and for the city. Anyone who is tested in this way as a child, youth, and adult, and always comes out of it untainted, is to be made a ruler as well as a guardian. (413d-414)

Only those who have proven true in their loyalty and commitment to public service can be trusted with power and with philosophy because only they will use it selflessly and in the interest of the city.⁹⁰

Justice demands that truth-seeking inquiry sacrifice itself in the interest of society. The ideal city only has room for Socrates the truth-seeking student in so far as he is also Socrates the compelled teacher whose truth seeking serves others. In the *Republic*, Plato creates a system where power and truth-seeking inquiry transform one another to the point that each is no longer recognizable. The life of the ruler resembles anything but the conventional vision of it: self-sacrificing to the point of having none of the luxuries and advantages traditionally associated with it. And the life of the philosopher is no longer one of useless or potentially dangerous truth-seeking for its own sake, but of inquiry in service of the city and its people. We know this by virtue of who is permitted to practice it: Only those who do not waver in their loyalty to the city and their willingness to put it above all else.

⁹⁰ Another necessary check Plato seems to endorse on the study of philosophy is age. In the *Republic*, Socrates claims that the dedicated study of dialectic should come later in life: “As youths and children, they should put their minds to youthful education and philosophy and take care of their bodies at a time when they are growing into manhood, so as to acquire a helper for philosophy. As they grow older and their souls begin to reach maturity, they should increase their mental exercises. Then, when their strength begins to fail and they have retired from politics and military service, they should graze freely in the pastures of philosophy and do nothing else—I mean the ones who are to live happily and, in death, add a fitting destiny in that other place to the life they have lived” (498c). In the *Symposium*, Socrates suggests that Alcibiades’ youth is an obstacle to his study: “The mind’s sight becomes sharp only when the body’s eyes go past their prime—and you are still a good long time away from that” (219). This response not only sets him apart from sophists who jump at any opportunity to shape the youth, it suggests that his activities are best-suited to adults with matured minds. This conflict, however, with the earlier image of Socrates the student who examines “young and old, citizen and stranger” in the *Apology* (30).

Education as Inquiry

While many dismiss the seriousness of the *Republic's* proposals, taking those in the *Laws* more seriously, it is evident that the basic ideas and assumptions that animate the underlying conception of education remain consistent.⁹¹ The Kallipolis takes children with no ties to a previous regime and gives them an educational program that will develop, socialize, and test them. In the *Laws*, Plato continues to think of children as shapeable entities to be properly developed, socialized, and tested. Education as socialization remains the primary and most effective way of cultivating virtuous citizens.

A prime example is in the discussion of the importance of drinking parties. While it may seem strange at first—Clinias remarks in surprise, “it looks to us, my friend, as if you mean to imply that passing the time with friends over a drink—provided we behave ourselves—is a considerable contribution to education”—it is fully consistent with Plato’s other reflections on the relationship between socialization and education and how it is that the youth are actually formed and developed (612d). Under the influence of alcohol, “drinkers get hot and, like iron in a fire, grow younger and softer, so that anyone who has the ability and skill to mold and educate them [the lawgiver] finds them as easy to handle as when they were young” (671). A properly-run drinking party not only educates through pleasure and socialization, it also offers a kind of “test” that “for cheapness, safety and speed is absolutely unrivaled” (650B). Like the pleasures of

⁹¹ An exception, Catherine Zuckert argues that the *Laws* actually demonstrate why “true political reform” cannot occur without the emergence of Socrates (“*Plato’s Laws: Postlude or Prelude to Socratic Political Philosophy?*”, 374).

children, it is carefully regulated by law so that exposure to wine only occurs in the approved ways and as a means of cultivating moderation.

As in the *Republic*, in the *Laws* children are best educated by impressing “the greatest possible liking” for what they are to become, and this is best achieved through play and pleasure in the arts (643d). The pleasures must be approved and supported by “men who have high moral standards and are full of years and experience” (659d). An ideally-formed citizen is one who has mastered his desires: curating and controlling sources of pleasures like games, dance, poetry, and music is thought to ensure that children develop into adults who find pleasure in the right things and in moderation.⁹² This leads the Athenian to not only suggest censoring the arts, but to avoid introducing any novelty into society which could have uncontrolled effects. He determines that sanctifying dance and music can guard against change, as well as ensuring that new material produced is reviewed and approved before release (798c-801d). Restricting travel and taking steps to guard against corruption from abroad are also deemed sound measures (950d-951c).

The primacy and power of education as socialization is further underlined in the *Laws* when the Athenian makes clear that the production of ideal citizens is not a matter of mastering content. He rejects sophistry, and is careful to stress that teaching and learning the ideal curriculum (mathematics) must be supported by “further laws and customs [that] can expel the spirit of pettiness and greed from the souls of those who are to master them and profit from them” (747c). If this social education fails, he warns, “you’ll find that without noticing it you’ve produced a ‘twister’ instead of a man of

⁹² For an extended discussion of Plato’s views on pleasure see Russell (2005).

learning—[...] one whose approach to wealth and life in general shows a narrowminded outlook” (747c). The written and especially unwritten laws of society are critical to education; teaching and learning the right academic curriculum is necessary but insufficient.

Children belong to the state first and only second to their families; education is to be compulsory for all, boys as well as girls (804c-805d). The person best suited to oversee education—“by far the most important of all the supreme offices in the state”—is the “best all-round citizen in the state” (765e-766b). The future face and security of the polity depends on its careful regulation of the development of all of its children. The Athenian explains:

Any living creature that flourishes in its first stages of growth gets a tremendous impetus towards its natural perfection and the final development appropriate to it, and this is true of both plants and animals (tame and wild), and men too. Man is a ‘tame’ animal, as we put it, and of course if he enjoys a good education and happens to have the right natural disposition, he’s apt to be a most heavenly and gentle creature; but his upbringing has only to be inadequate or misguided and he’ll become the wildest animal on the face of the earth. (765e-b)

The utopic idea presented in both the *Republic* and the *Laws* is that when all modes of education are correctly harnessed and applied to the raw material of childhood, an ideal final product can be formed, limited only by its inherent potential. Proper development is such an important, fragile process, that even the circumstances of conception should be considered (775c-e). “Children must not be left without teachers [...] any more than flocks and herds must be allowed to live without attendants” (808d).

Much of what is discussed with respect to the upbringing of children refers to unwritten rules: The perfect citizen is not one who follows the written law to the letter, but one who “has given a lifetime of unswerving obedience to the written words of the legislator, whether they took the form of a law, or simply expressed approval or

disapproval” (823). In other words, the perfect citizen is loyal to the standards, culture, and traditions of the polity; the spirit of the law, and not merely its letters.

Judging by Plato’s (unfinished) work, it would appear that he did in fact believe that ideally, a polity can and should use education to serve the community first, not the individual who in any case will ultimately benefit from the whole. The legislator should first think, “I’ve organized the state as a whole” and only then “what sort of citizen do I want to produce?” (830). The standard for the ideally educated individual is, in other words, determined by the nature and goals of the polity.

Plato knew that a true civic education must pervade all aspects of life and touch all sites of influence in order to have a desired shaping effect. In the *Laws*, the Athenian argues that more properly educated citizens are better than one precisely because they will continue to educate one another by informal association (641b). This suggests that one lesson of Plato’s *Republic* is a reminder that anyone serious about cultivating citizenship must look far beyond schools to the practices and everyday experiences that socialize. If anything, forces like law, culture, and society are really the most powerful and effective means of education.

Today, this insight is often forgotten by those who embark on projects of public and private schooling and by those who take teachers to be the primary source of a child’s education. Both consistently overestimate the extent to which as well as the means by which schooling can and should do the work of civic socialization and leadership development. When individuals reflect on how schools have shaped them, they are usually reflecting on how schools have socialized them, often through the non-academic experiences they encountered there. For many, school is not only the primary path to a

comfortable wage, it is their primary source of community, and it is this experience of community that has the most impact in “shaping” them. Good citizenship is not a question of providing the proper academic curriculum in the classroom.

If one is truly interested in the work of cultivating citizens, one should focus on developing habits, practices, and communities that regularly affect and socialize all citizens rather than programs of education that assume youth can be shaped into a stable ideal. As Plato wrote in the *Laws*, “The best way to educate the younger generation (as well as yourself) is not to rebuke them but patently to practice all your life what you preach to others” (728c). The “socialized adult,” the “formed citizen”—these are not the products of direct instruction but identities lived and affirmed through socialization and through everyday practices of citizenship. Every society needs institutions to socialize and assimilate youth, but it is mistake to think of virtuous citizens as “products” to be made and that education’s value is only in the work of shaping and development.

Moreover, when education is narrowly defined as a kind of “mass shaping” that results in “finished products” in the form of adult citizens, it has little to do with the kind of learning that comes from genuine curiosity or the organic desire to exercise innate capacities for reason and creativity. It obscures an alternative—what I have termed truth-seeking education—which is not a formal, teleological, and controllable process with a definitive end. Rather than seek to develop and “achieve” a new and improved person, truth-seeking inquiry is an activity motivated by a genuine curiosity about the world and others.

Whether Plato ever settled the question of the desirability of a wholly political vision of education and a wholly educational view of politics remains somewhat

ambiguous, but what we do know of his life confirms his aspirations were as political as they were educational. Although he is only as reliable as his sources, according to Diogenes, Plato began as a painter and poet, but his encounter with Socrates at twenty led him to burn his work, and like Socrates he came to be mocked by the poets.⁹³ Born to a political family, Plato aspired to found his own republic but was ultimately turned away from politics. Citing Pamphila's now-lost *Memorabilia*, Diogenes recounts how Arcadians and Thebians called on Plato to make laws for their new Megalopolis, but that he rejected their request when he learned they would not support the "equality of possessions."⁹⁴ Corroborating the political Plato found in Diogenes, Plato's *Seventh Letter*, the authenticity of which remains debated, also describes Plato's political aspirations and his belief in the need to educate philosopher kings.⁹⁵

Alongside his political work, Plato also founded the Academy, which rested "outside the walls" of the city, "in a grove."⁹⁶ But while its location may imply a refuge from political life—a special place where intellectuals could gather and seek truth freely apart from the city—the fact that he and other members were sought after for political advice suggests a less clear separation. For John M. Cooper, this fact itself shows that Plato's Academy was "not merely an institute for higher education and for research in

⁹³ Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 1:3.

⁹⁴ Laertius, 1:3.

⁹⁵ Myles Burnyeat and Michael Frede, *The Pseudo-Platonic Seventh Letter* (OUP Oxford, 2015).

⁹⁶ Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 1:3.

mathematics, the sciences, philosophy, and ethical and political thought.”⁹⁷ Showing how his ideas in the academy appear in political speeches, Danielle Allen also remains convinced that Plato wanted to affect political change by accumulating “social power,” and she contends that even if Plato is not the author of the *Seventh Letter*, whoever did write it spoke the truth about him.⁹⁸ At the same time, Allen is careful not to suggest that Plato believed ideas could actually translate directly into politics unchanged.

On my reading, Plato made Socrates a symbol of truth-seeking inquiry only to sacrifice him for the greater good. That is, he suggested that achieving a true reconciliation between education for truth and education for becoming would necessitate a Socrates who was not engaged in truth-seeking inquiry for its own sake, but as a contribution to society. This, I think, was Plato’s ultimate view of education—Plato the writer, founder, and institutionalist—and not necessarily the historical Socrates’ view—Socrates the conversationalist gadfly in the city square. For Plato, the pursuit of truth had to be moderated to better serve the city: Socrates could only be killed, exiled, or transformed.

⁹⁷ Plato, *Plato: Complete Works*, 1319.

⁹⁸ Danielle S. Allen, *Why Plato Wrote* (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 13.

III

Cultivating Man: Rousseau's Experiment

Although we know relatively little regarding how Plato understood his life, we know the most intimate details about the inner life of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Genevan philosopher who lived from 1712 to 1778. This is due in part to the fact that he wrote a notoriously intimate autobiography in addition to the many other works that made him famous. Like Plato, Rousseau was deeply interested in education as both becoming and truth-seeking, but as his authorship of an autobiography suggests, he saw the problem of becoming in the modern world as a highly personal and individualistic one.

Rousseau's own becoming did not begin happily: His mother died a few days after having him, his father had to leave him to relatives, and although he had one brother seven years his senior, he left to embrace a libertine lifestyle. Rousseau eventually started an apprenticeship but despised it. He ran away, sought refuge with the Catholic Church, and found a maternal figure, a woman thirteen years his senior who was separated from her husband. Rousseau idolized her; he called her *mammon*, and he also fell in love with her. When he turned twenty, they became lovers, and as she was already involved with another who worked for her, he shared her. Rousseau spent his twenties learning a great deal from this woman and from studying philosophy, math, and music on his own. Mostly self-educated, he took on various jobs, including a failed attempt at working as a tutor. Eventually moving to Paris to promote his new system for writing music, he found rejection, but he also made friends in the philosophes of the French Enlightenment.

In Paris, Rousseau met another woman. He said of Therese: “At first I wanted to form her mind. I wasted my effort. Her mind is what nature has made it, cultivation and effort do not take hold there. I do not blush at all to admit that she has never known how to read very well, although she writes passably.”⁹⁹ He had five children with her and abandoned each one of them to a foundling hospital, citing Plato as the one behind his thinking at the time. While Therese and Rousseau never legally married, over twenty years after they first became involved, he did eventually declare that he considered her his wife, and she was his sole inheritor. By then, Rousseau had already lost all of his friends. Believing no one understood him and that everyone was conspiring against him, the older he got the more paranoid he became. He had already also published *Emile*, his opus on education, and spent time as a fugitive because of its discussion of religion.

Rousseau was deeply influenced by Plato, but as I demonstrate in this chapter, he faced a critical problem with his model when he realized that socialization will only produce ideal men and citizens if and when a given society is already ideal. In *Emile*, he therefore experimented with limiting socialization at the individual level in order to create an ideal man or “anti-citizen” who might resist the toxic effects of a non-ideal society. Against common readings, I argue in this chapter that Rousseau did not advocate molding men toward predetermined models. Instead, he suggested cultivating the potential of each individual through a personalized and inimitable program of education. Putting his theory into practice, Rousseau also created curated fictional worlds for his readers, writing novels that provided ideal, private, and imagined experiences of

⁹⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions and Correspondence, Including the Letters to Malesherbes* (UPNE, 2013), 278–79.

socialization. As for truth-seeking education, Rousseau determined that it is best pursued in solitude or exile.

Whereas Plato wrote in a time that induced him to defend philosophical inquiry against claims that it was useless or dangerous, Rousseau wrote in a time when it had become fashionable, at least among the educated minority, to practice and espouse philosophy. In eighteenth-century France, half of children did not survive to age ten.¹⁰⁰ Families in cities like Paris would send their newborn children away to suburbs and villages to be nursed. Only after staying with a nurse for one or two years or more would they be sent back to live with the family, presuming they had survived. Wealthy families had private tutors for their children, but there were also village schools that taught a basic education. Most children had a short adolescence, and only a small minority enjoyed a longer childhood and studied in a college. Among the educated classes, it was a time of great intellectual, artistic, and philosophical fervor.

Rousseau found much to critique in contemporary practice, and having found Plato's understanding of education as socialization persuasive, he devoted much of his energy to critiquing and reimagining law, culture, and institutions. Like Plato, Rousseau viewed children as raw material that could be developed and directed through education. And like Plato, Rousseau believed that the key to shaping ideal citizens lies in the laws, institutions, and social practices of society. But unlike Plato, Rousseau came to exemplify a deep commitment to the singularity of the individual. In order to produce such an individual, Rousseau theorized an individualized form of education as socialization that

¹⁰⁰ Colin Heywood, *Growing Up in France: From the Ancien Régime to the Third Republic* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 36–52.

rejected transmission, the traditional mode of education between a teacher and a student. His new education, which he termed both “natural” and “negative,” assumed that the self is the outcome of formative experiences, and so rather than instruct the child in who he must become and how he must behave, the teacher would instead curate those life experiences that would form the child, guiding him through each stage of growth until he reached adulthood. This education was deemed “natural” by Rousseau not because it avoided care or planning, but because it would be guided at all times by the specific nature of the individual child, thereby allowing his natural goodness to develop undistorted.

Being more interested in criticizing existing educational practice than offering a realistic alternative, Rousseau warned that this proposed education was neither wholly practicable nor likely to succeed. Education could offer no guarantees, and even the best raised child might succumb to the pressures and influences of her environment as an adult. In practice, he thought, the best one could do was to persuade and inspire others toward goodness and virtue by example. For Rousseau, appropriating the relatively new genre of the novel offered one way of doing this.

In addition to providing the example of his novelistic *Emile*, Rousseau wrote *Julie* as a way to inspire readers to become more virtuous. The new form of the novel and the privacy of reading allowed Rousseau to create an imaginary social world devoid of the corruption he perceived in real society. This kind of purified socialization in private, he thought, would never cure social corruption, but it could help serve as an antidote.

Like Plato’s view of public education, Rousseau’s private and liberal education ultimately sacrificed education as truth-seeking inquiry, even as it claimed to encourage

the natural curiosity of children. This is because Rousseau not only believed, as Plato did, that education as truth-seeking is dangerous for politics and society at large, but also because he deemed it a threat to virtue and happiness. Rousseau is critical of the rise of what, on his account, only appears to be a culture that celebrates education for truth, arguing that because the kind of genuine love of learning for its own sake exhibited by Socrates is so rare, very few people are suited for it. Education as truth-seeking inquiry—that is, education pursued for its own sake as an intrinsically valuable activity driven by human curiosity—had to be “tamed” and relegated to the margins. By contrast, “useful” education could and should be used to form individuals for public and private life, depending on the given social and political context.

Grappling with Plato

Rousseau’s relationship to Plato was a complicated one. As I already mentioned, in his *Confessions*, Rousseau looked back on his choice to abandon all five of his children and connected this to Plato. Attempting to justify his decision, he wrote, “I looked at myself as a member of Plato’s *Republic*. More than once since then, the regrets of my heart have taught me that I had deceived myself.”¹⁰¹ Later on, he again expressed regret, recounting how writing *Emile* manifested his guilt. Notably, he never clarified his earlier statement or specified the exact nature of his self-deception. Did he come to believe that Plato’s theory of education was fundamentally wrong? Or was the error Rousseau’s in mistaking Paris for the Kallipolis? Perhaps Rousseau meant that he regretted thinking that

¹⁰¹ Rousseau, *The Confessions and Correspondence, Including the Letters to Malesherbes*, 299.

the *Republic*, with its “chimerical” institutions, was ever really meant to be read for practical application at all, a mistake many of Rousseau’s own readers would come to make about his *Emile*.¹⁰² Whatever Rousseau precisely meant by his comment, his relationship to Plato was evidently shifting, complicated, and personal.

Scholars of Rousseau have long noted his similarities and connections to Plato. In *Rousseau’s Socratic Aemilian Myths*, Madeline B. Ellis argues that *Emile* and *The Social Contract* are essentially rewritten Judeo-Christian versions of Plato’s *Republic* and *Symposium*. In “Human Nature and the Love of Wisdom,” Laurence D. Cooper identifies similarities between the fifth books of *Emile* and *The Republic*, particularly when Plato’s text is read as an account of the soul rather than the city. And more recently, David Lay Williams has, by opposing Hobbesian, positivist readings of Rousseau, provided one of the most extensive studies of his affinity with Plato, emphasizing their shared transcendentalism.¹⁰³ As these studies show, Rousseau not only carefully read and referenced Plato, he was deeply influenced by him, especially on the question of education.

But while political theorists have tended toward noting Rousseau’s similarities to Plato, philosophers of education such as John Dewey have focused almost exclusively on their differences.¹⁰⁴ For them, Rousseau presents a liberal vision of education in stark

¹⁰² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: Or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 40.

¹⁰³ David Lay Williams, *Rousseau’s Platonic Enlightenment* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007).

¹⁰⁴ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (Macmillan, 1916).

contrast to Plato's illiberal one. On their account, Rousseau's *Emile* is the antithesis of Plato's *Republic* in that it celebrates the autonomy of the child and serves as a foundational precursor to progressive education. Whose portrait is correct? In so far as they overdraw either Rousseau's rebellion from Plato or his discipleship, both pictures are misleading.

Whether imagining a wholly new society or suggesting improvements to an existing one, Rousseau certainly followed many of Plato's insights when he conceived of an ideal political community. Like Plato, he thought education is "the most important business of the state"¹⁰⁵ and that forming citizens is a long-term project that not only begins from childhood but also involves careful socialization. Like Plato, he advocated using a public system of education to route men into leadership opportunities and thereby ensure that only the best citizens are entrusted with the responsibility of oversight.¹⁰⁶ And, while he certainly did not endorse erasing the family, he did say that children should be educated by the state and not "abandoned to their fathers' lights and prejudices."¹⁰⁷ After all, he noted, the state has a greater interest in the results of an education and, in generally outliving the father and the family, is guaranteed to see its results.

¹⁰⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on Political Economy," in *Rousseau: "The Social Contract" and Other Later Political Writings*, unknown edition (Cambridge, U.K. ; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 22.

¹⁰⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Considerations on the Government of Poland," in *Rousseau: "The Social Contract" and Other Later Political Writings*, unknown edition (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 191.

¹⁰⁷ Rousseau, "Discourse on Political Economy," 21.

But Rousseau also modified Plato's view of civic education in several ways: first, he stressed in both *The Political Economy* and *Considerations on the Government of Poland* that public education is for a *free* people. Writing in the former, "national education is suitable only for free men; only they enjoy a common existence and are truly bound together by Law."¹⁰⁸ Second, Rousseau emphasized the role of love, patriotism, and sentiment in educating citizens, writing in *Considerations on the Government of Poland* that "No constitution will ever be good and solid unless the law rules the citizens' heart."¹⁰⁹ Rousseau did not think that men could be taught to love anything, but he reasoned "it is not impossible to teach them to love one object rather than another, and to love what is genuinely fine rather than what is malformed."¹¹⁰ He went on to suggest that children might be taught to see themselves as only a part of the "larger whole" of the state, to "feel themselves members of the fatherland" and "love it with that exquisite sentiment which any isolated man has only for himself."¹¹¹ Whereas Plato thought only a subset of the citizenry could be capable of selflessly caring for the common good, the more egalitarian Rousseau suggests that under the right circumstances the entire citizenry might in theory prove capable.

If in his *Republic* Plato suggested that we each have fixed natures that can be separated into three distinct classes according to our drives and capacities, for Rousseau,

¹⁰⁸ Rousseau, "Considerations on the Government of Poland," 189.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹¹⁰ Rousseau, "Discourse on Political Economy," 20.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

“good social institutions are those that best know how to denature man, to take his absolute existence from him in order to give him a relative one and transport the I into the common unity.”¹¹² Every individual person is somehow singularly unique and yet each one shares in a greater human nature marked by perfectibility. As there is no predetermined end point for humanity—we can make ourselves in our own image by learning from our environment and changing it to suit us—individuals were considered by Rousseau to be potentially even more malleable than they were for Plato.

As I will argue, this does not mean that Rousseau thought there is no longer any natural, normative standard for how individuals should fashion themselves as private individuals, but it did mean that with the right legislator and under the right conditions, everyone—and not simply a select subset—could theoretically rise above instincts and appetites. While in his *Republic* Plato imagined a city that allows each citizen a role as part of a class that accords with his or her nature, in *The Social Contract* Rousseau imagined an ideal city that depends on all members overriding their individual natures to achieve a profound and freeing moral transformation.¹¹³

¹¹² Rousseau, *Emile*, 1979, 40.

¹¹³ In taking this view, I reject readings of Rousseau that deny *The Social Contract* demands a literal transformation, such as J.S. Maloy’s “The Very Order of Things: Rousseau’s Tutorial Republicanism,” where he insists that Rousseau does not call for a literal “transformation” and claims that “at most Rousseau defended the regulation or redirection of natural inclinations, rather than wholesale psychological transformation, or even coercion” (238). I maintain that those who refuse to take seriously the idea that Rousseau’s citizen demands a transformation fail to pay attention to his language of denaturing, or what Roger Masters calls a process of “transforming love of oneself, the first principle of natural man, into selfless patriotism” (*The Political Philosophy of Jean Jacques Rousseau*, 12).

But Rousseau's apparent optimism about the malleability of human nature had its limits: He was highly aware of how history, geography, culture, and other sociological forces create important differences between societies. Differences in constitutions and other factors must be accounted for, and they inevitably limit the extent to which a society is suited for the ideal he posits. There were, therefore, preconditions to his recommendations for public education: It is only when "all are equal by the constitution of the State," that "all ought to be educated together and in the same fashion, and if it is impossible to establish a completely free public education, it must at least be set at a cost the poor can afford."¹¹⁴ And so although our becoming is not set and predetermined for Rousseau, everyone is born into a particular context and environment that cannot be easily escaped.

Rousseau therefore defended what Plato likely took for granted: Cultivating citizenship requires cultivating a particular orientation to one's own society and teaching people to love their own more than outsiders. Rousseau accepted that love and unity within a community demands a kind of parochialism, and he readily defended this. He criticized "those cosmopolitans who go to great length in their books to discover duties they do not deign to fulfill around them," insisting that "the essential thing is to be good to the people with whom one lives."¹¹⁵ He argued that loving those distant from us is much less demanding than loving our neighbors and that loving those in one's own community requires taking responsibility and making sacrifices in a much more real and

¹¹⁴ Rousseau, "Considerations on the Government of Poland," 190.

¹¹⁵ Rousseau, *Emile*, 1979, 39.

immediate way. He further reasoned that it is actually through being citizens that we are able to imagine a common humanity at all: “We conceive of the general society in terms of our particular societies, the establishment of small Republics leads us to think of the large one, and we do not properly begin to become men until after having been Citizens.”¹¹⁶ Citizenship teaches us to love beyond ourselves, and a true love for mankind can only be learned by first loving one’s own.¹¹⁷

Rousseau’s model for the ideal, virtuous citizen was Cato who “defends the state, freedom, and the laws against the conquerors of the world, and finally leaves the earth when he no longer finds on it a fatherland to serve.”¹¹⁸ Cato found his happiness in others, and his value was decided “by his relation to the whole, which is the social body.”¹¹⁹ Unfortunately, Rousseau lamented, this kind of pure, selfless patriotism had become increasingly impossible. Whereas ancient lawgivers such as Lycurgus were able to build institutions that “transport the I into the common unity,” resulting in a polity where “each individual believes himself no longer one but a part of the unity and no longer feels except within the whole,”¹²⁰ this was hardly feasible for most places in the

¹¹⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Geneva Manuscript: Bk. I, Ch. 2; from Bk. II, Ch. 4,” in *Rousseau: “The Social Contract” and Other Later Political Writings*, unknown edition (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 158.

¹¹⁷ Notably, Rousseau does not seem to think that good citizenship is learned through partial associations, and he worries they will lead to more division than unity in the end. Rousseau therefore forbids partial associations in *The Social Contract*, relying on the institutions designed by the legislator, as well as public festivals and civil religion to nurture and promote the appropriate love of the whole that citizenship demands.

¹¹⁸ Rousseau, “Discourse on Political Economy,” 16.

¹¹⁹ Rousseau, *Emile*, 1979, 39–40.

modern world. Rousseau thought that Sparta and Rome had benefited from a constancy that was no longer present in modern life where social forces and positions were in constant flux.

According to Rousseau, modern life had fundamentally fractured our being. The contemporary man, the bourgeois, wants to retain “the primacy of the sentiments of nature” in the civil order, and so he is always divided between his “inclinations” and his “duties.”¹²¹ The bourgeois does not simply care only for himself, he *pretends* to care for others while caring only for himself. He is therefore in constant contradiction with himself, always appearing other than himself and always speaking one way but acting another. To illustrate this, Rousseau employs a sailing metaphor in Book I of *Emile*: He describes modern men as ships, pulled by conflicting tides and winds, unhappily torn between their natural selves and their social selves.

Put another way, Rousseau’s central difficulty with Plato’s model of education as socialization was that it works best when there is little to no conflict between one’s inner self and one’s interests and one’s outer self and one’s duties to the community. Being educated by and for a society more preoccupied with the appearance of virtue rather than virtue itself will only generate nonideal men and citizens. In his own time, Rousseau argues, the gap between the two had become so great that neither is achieved: “Thus, in conflict and floating during the whole course of our life, we end it without having been able to put ourselves in harmony with ourselves and without having been good either for

¹²⁰ Rousseau, 40.

¹²¹ Rousseau, 40.

ourselves or for others.”¹²² When nature and society are not merely different but actively opposed, we lose our natural goodness¹²³ and inner harmony.

That is, when our natural faculties and sentiments directly oppose the habits and opinions we learn from society and our own experience of the world, they cannot be reconciled: “Their harmony is impossible. Forced to combat nature or the social institutions, one must choose between making a man or a citizen, for one cannot make both at the same time.”¹²⁴ It is this tension which Judith Shklar identified at the heart of Rousseau’s work and which rightly led her to see him as offering distinct models against which contemporary life could be judged.¹²⁵ Shklar saw two poles: “One model was a Spartan city, the other a tranquil household, and the two were meant to stand in polar opposition to each other.”¹²⁶ Each option offered wholeness and harmony: *The Social Contract* by combatting nature through institutions and effectively denaturing man, and *Emile* by strengthening nature, resisting social institutions, and solidifying man. As each

¹²² Rousseau, 41.

¹²³ One of the main proponents of the systematic Rousseau, Arthur Melzer correctly demonstrates that the natural goodness of man is the fundamental principle that coherently links Rousseau’s works. On Rousseau’s account, the potential for good is already within each of us, and goodness would flourish if only one could keep society from dividing us against ourselves. That said, being virtuous, which is distinct from being good, demands struggle and does not come naturally.

¹²⁴ Rousseau, *Emile*, 1979, 39.

¹²⁵ Judith Shklar, *Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau’s Social Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

¹²⁶ Shklar, 3.

alternative takes the opposite strategy, these warring visions are ultimately incompatible and irreconcilable.

In affirming this reading of Rousseau, I reject those interpretive trends which have sought to challenge or outright reject Shklar's view. One group of critics, including Grace Roosevelt, Tracy Strong, Matthew Simpson, and Frederick Neuhouser, have insisted that *Emile* does in fact offer a civic education. On their reading, what Rousseau really means when he says we must choose between making a man and making a citizen is that while one cannot create both a man and citizen at the same time, one "can do both at *different* times."¹²⁷ According to Strong, *Emile* is made to be a citizen in a just society exactly like that of *The Social Contract*.¹²⁸ According to Matthew Simpson, *Emile* the "independent rural householder" is "also a citizen and ready to perform the duties of citizenship if they are required of him."¹²⁹ And according to Neuhouser, *Emile*'s education has two parts which taken together result in a "man-citizen," not a man instead of a citizen.¹³⁰

The problem with all of these interpretations is that they fail to properly distinguish between a man made to be a citizen as Rousseau understands the term citizen

¹²⁷ Frederick Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹²⁸ Tracy B. Strong, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Politics of the Ordinary* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002).

¹²⁹ Matthew Simpson, *Rousseau: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2007), 134.

¹³⁰ Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition*.

and a man made to live in society. As Lawrence Cooper notes, there is a difference between “sociability” and “citizenship,” and while “nature and citizenship are roads that do not meet,” “nature and *society*” are more compatible.¹³¹ The fact that Emile is raised to live in society does not mean that he can rightly be called a true citizen in Rousseau’s eyes. As John M. Warner puts it, “though Emile and Sophie must inhabit a political society, the one that best suits them is not Rousseau’s own, which requires a passionate civic commitment that they decidedly lack, but rather one which gives them the space to realize their collective good in the privacy of their own home” and which “requires [a] profoundly different moral orientation than does the public world.”¹³² Warner correctly argues that Emile’s political education is incompatible with Rousseau’s ideal concept of citizenship.¹³³

Ignoring this distinction and the specificity of Rousseau’s image of the virtuous citizen, many scholars persist in arguing that Emile’s education is a civic one, sometimes

¹³¹ Lawrence Cooper, *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 50–51.

¹³² John Warner, “On the Naturalness of Friendship and the Family,” in *The Rousseauian Mind* (Routledge, 2019), 291–95.

¹³³ It should be noted that Warner also departs from Shklar, Gauthier, Okin, Melzer, and others who emphasize Emile’s education in independence only. He argues, “if escaping the perils of deep interdependence were truly the aim of Emile, Rousseau would not have needed to write Books IV and V of the work” (*Rousseau and the Problem of Human Relations*, 91). Warner suggests romantic love is presented in *Emile* as an alternative to both political association and friendship. Rousseau “prepares his pupil not for a life of independence or republican politics but rather for a life of domestic repose, one that entails complete and completely personal dependence on his beloved Sophie” (94). On Warner’s reading, domestic life is an alternative to political life, not its foundation. Marriage is not “a tool of political socialization” for Rousseau, but a “direct instantiation of the human good” (89). Tragically, “human love” ultimately proves “simply too frail to survive sustained exposure to the vicissitudes of fortune (103).

granting that Rousseau is offering “an alternative form of citizenship, rather than an alternative to citizenship.”¹³⁴ But as Geraint Parry argues, “citizen education has to be continuing education,”¹³⁵ and this is simply not the education of *Emile*. *Emile*’s education is not aimed at citizenship, but at forming an individual who will do good and live a mostly private life.

A second, related strand of Shklarian critics grant the distinction between “man” and “citizen” but insist that these are not opposed to one another. That is, while *Emile* does make a man only and *The Social Contract* does make a citizen only, these are “neither rival enterprises nor competing alternatives.”¹³⁶ According to these interpretations, *Emile*’s private education lays the groundwork for the civic education completed in *The Social Contract* and by the Legislator. In other words, *The Social Contract* is compatible with *Emile* in that it serves as a kind of sequel.¹³⁷ Rather than read Rousseau’s works as offering incompatible alternatives,¹³⁸ these scholars seek to

¹³⁴ Shawn Fraistat, “Domination and Care in Rousseau’s *Emile*,” *American Political Science Review* 110, no. 4 (November 2016): 897.

¹³⁵ Geraint Parry, “*Émile*: Learning to Be Men, Women, and Citizens,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, ed. Patrick Riley, Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 264.

¹³⁶ Bjorn Gomes, “*Emile* the Citizen? A Reassessment of the Relationship between Private Education and Citizenship in Rousseau’s Political Thought,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 17, no. 2 (April 1, 2018): 197.

¹³⁷ Nancy J. Hirschmann, *The Subject of Liberty: Toward a Feminist Theory of Freedom* (Princeton University Press, 2009), 51.

¹³⁸ See, for example, Amélie Oksenberg Rorty’s “Rousseau’s Therapeutic Experiments” where she reads Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, *Emile*, and *Julie* as “therapeutic thought experiments” offering distinct “political,” “psychological and educative,” and “domestic/affectional” solutions to the problems of modernity (421).

harmonize the apparently contradictory collectivist and individualist impulses in Rousseau.¹³⁹

But Rousseau's coherence and consistency does not depend on reconciling the division between man and citizen, and, even if Rousseau did intend *The Social Contract* as a kind of appendix to *Emile*, this neither proves that Rousseau imagined his *Emile* as a private education program that precedes the public education of *The Social Contract*, nor does it discount that they were meant to be read as contrasting alternatives supported by a consistent critique. Rousseau never says *The Social Contract* depicts the completion of Emile's education, and I would argue that Emile's fate in *Les Solitaires* suggests he is more likely to fit the description of a potential lawgiver than that of a citizen of an ideal social contract. Moreover, like the previous group of critics, these interpretations give undue primacy to political relationships in Rousseau's thought and ultimately miss the central tension between man and society at the heart of his philosophy.

Finally, a third group of scholars accepts "man" and "citizen" as both distinct ends and irreconcilable alternatives, but they unnecessarily expand and complicate the ideal types that Rousseau offers beyond Shklar's two poles. Writing just a year before Shklar, Roger Masters had already added the "philosopher or solitary dreamer" as a third choice.¹⁴⁰ Also extending the man vs. citizen paradigm, Tzvetan Todorov identified three

¹³⁹ Patrick Riley (2001) goes so far as to argue that Emile's education is the transformative key to realizing the general will. For him, Emile's education demonstrates a "becoming-in-time" which can be applied to nations and civil societies.

¹⁴⁰ Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Jean Jacques Rousseau*, 25. Masters clarifies that the philosopher or solitary dreamer can either be a "true philosopher" who is, "with the exception of the legislator or statesman who can render an entire society virtuous, the noblest life for man," or "if he has a "sensitive soul," the private man can retire to the life

other Rousseauian types in pursuit of wholeness and happiness.¹⁴¹ Increasing the number to five, Lawrence Cooper insisted each represents distinct alternative ways of life.¹⁴²

Scholars invested in outlining all the available “types” in Rousseau’s work differ on their number, character, desirability, and realizability according to the extent to which they view Rousseau as a realist or idealist, extremist or moderate, pessimist or utopian.

But in looking to Rousseau for concrete solutions about which way of being is best, readers risk missing one of Shklar’s most important insights: When she calls

of the “promeneur solitaire,” being good without virtue by surrendering himself totally to natural impulsion and the “sentiment of his own existence” (253).

¹⁴¹ See Todorov’s *Frail Happiness: An Essay on Rousseau*, originally published in 1985 as *Frêle bonheur: Essai sur Rousseau*, where he affirms that the citizen and the individual are alternatives, but he splits the individual into two types, one “physical and solitary” and the other “moral and universal.”¹⁴¹ The citizen, found in Rousseau’s political writings, leads to a “social whole,” the solitary individual, found in Rousseau’s autobiographical writings, leads to an “individual whole,” and the universal individual—unnamed by Rousseau but exemplified by *Emile*—leads to a cosmopolitan “way of moderation.”¹⁴¹ While the first two options demand giving up a part of oneself, only the third “holds an [uncertain] promise of happiness,” and this is the one that Rousseau really advocates.¹⁴¹ On Todorov’s account, this third option is a true alternative to the other two, and the one that Rousseau really advocates. More recently, the idea that Rousseau advocates an unnamed path of moderation is also taken up by Jennifer Einspahr (2010) who suggests that Rousseau’s extremes are not meant to be resolved but to point us toward “mediation” and what’s between the extremes.

¹⁴² Cooper, *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life*, 51–52. The five types are: “first, the divided, corrupt social man, exemplified most commonly by the bourgeois but most perfectly (according to Rousseau) by the vain, malicious philosophes who conspired against Jean-Jacques; second, the virtuous citizen of the ancient, austere polis; third, the inhabitant of the pure state of nature; fourth the Jean-Jacques of the *Reveries* and selected other autobiographical depictions; and fifth, *Emile*.” Of these, the second, fourth, and fifth types are equally worthy (if unattainable) ideals. Benjamin Storey also affirms the existence of five types, but insists that none of them are complete ideals that represent the best way of life, although there is a hierarchy among them: The “citizen” and the “natural man” are lower forms, namely because they lack self-knowledge, and “*Emile*” and “Jean-Jacques” rank highest. Benjamin Storey, “Rousseau and the Problem of Self-Knowledge,” *The Review of Politics* 71, no. 2 (ed 2009): 251.

Rousseau “the last of the classical utopists,” she means that Rousseau’s “models” never sought to “set up a perfect community, but simply to bring moral judgment to bear on the social misery to which men have so unnecessarily reduced themselves.”¹⁴³ Rousseau’s “types” are tools for critique and persuasion, not necessarily typologies for the best and worst ways of life or templates for who we should or should not be. While more pessimistic and tragic readings of Rousseau tend toward this view, there is an equally problematic tendency to forget that Rousseau does not want his readers to despair but, as I will argue, to be inspired toward goodness and virtue to the extent that it is possible, given the particularities and possibilities of their individual person and community.¹⁴⁴

Schemas of Rousseau’s multiple character types are almost always made without reference to the characters in works like *Julie* or to the possibilities Rousseau outlines for women. Moreover, while it can be useful, focusing on types detracts from the basic distinction Rousseau clearly articulated between the man who is natural and private and the citizen who is denatured and public. For Rousseau, goodness and virtue is defined differently for the man and the citizen, which is why it remains the most fundamental and the most helpful distinction to draw in understanding his thought.

On my reading, whereas Rousseau’s *The Social Contract* exemplified an ideal polity with appropriate institutions for public education and socialization, *Emile* offered an ideal portrait of individual development through private education. Both sought to

¹⁴³ Shklar, *Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau’s Social Theory*, 1–2.

¹⁴⁴ See, for example, Storey who correctly suggests that Rousseau was “more concerned with presenting a comprehensive depiction of human problems than he was with teaching us how to solve them” (“Rousseau and the Problem of Self-Knowledge,” 251).

address the same contradiction between the natural and civic self: Whereas *The Social Contract* attempted to do so by combatting nature through institutions and effectively denaturing man, *Emile* sought to achieve this by strengthening nature, resisting social institutions, and solidifying man. Emile is educated in accordance with who and what he is away from societal pressures and expectations, and it is only when he is already formed that he goes on to join and engage with society. While participants in *The Social Contract* will live first and foremost for others, even as they remain individual men, Emile will live first and foremost for himself and his family, even as he remains a member of a political community. He will read only *parts* of *The Social Contract*. The end product Rousseau has in mind for Emile is not (by necessity) wholly apolitical, but he is not a model citizen either. He will do his duty, but he is always a man first.

In seeking to know and form the cultivated natural man exemplified by Emile, Rousseau turned to private education. As Master's put it, "What Plato attempted for the city, Rousseau does for the individual."¹⁴⁵ In so doing, Rousseau embarked on precisely the project Plato so often appeared to doubt in his dialogues: Teaching a pupil to become virtuous through private education. But his method would not be like that of the sophist, but a new kind that understood socialization as the key determinant of becoming. His new education would not involve directly imparting lessons and principles, but would instead attempt to shield the child and guide his experience of the world so that he might become the best version of himself.

¹⁴⁵ Roger Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Jean Jacques Rousseau* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 14.

Cultivating Natural Man

The assumption in both Plato and Rousseau is that when education is correctly harnessed and applied to the raw material of childhood, an ideal final product can be formed, limited only by its inherent potential. Education is the key to becoming, and properly wielded, it can create ideal selves and societies. In *Emile*, Rousseau sought to educate an ideal “natural” man who does not develop according to the opinions and expectations of others, but according to his authentic self. If the civil man could only be a fraction, a numerator dependent on a denominator, the natural man would be a whole number who finds his happiness within himself and for himself.¹⁴⁶

And so, whereas the system of public education in *The Republic* sought to prepare each citizen for the role in society that suited him, Rousseau made clear that he is not educating Emile for any particular function; his goal is not the ideal society, but the ideal man. In nature, “since men are all equal, their common calling is man's estate and whoever is well raised for that calling cannot fail to fulfill those callings related to it.”¹⁴⁷ As such, the tutor is not interested in whether his pupil is destined for “the sword, the church, [or] the bar,” because “prior to the calling of his parents is nature’s call to human life,” and “living is the job” he wants to teach him.¹⁴⁸ He will be, first and foremost, a man, not a position, and this will align with the realities of modern society where no

¹⁴⁶ Rousseau, “Discourse on Political Economy,” 16.

¹⁴⁷ Rousseau, *Emile*, 1979, 41.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

generation can take its rank and role for granted and no one can be sure they will do what their parents did.

In order for Emile to become an ideal and free being, he must comprehend and come to terms with necessity—not the opinion of others. This is why Rousseau cited Robinson Crusoe as a model for Emile who will help him to “know real value, which is the inverse of the value given things by the vanity of social men” and to “respect the producers of real value and despise the producers of value founded on vanity.”¹⁴⁹ As Allan Bloom argues in his introduction to *Emile*, a key feature of *Robinson Crusoe*, which Rousseau called “the most felicitous treatise on natural education,” is its ability to inspire in Emile a love of wholeness that repels the “modern division of labor which produces superfluity and makes men partial.”¹⁵⁰ The novel’s central focus on preservation and necessity correctly directs and prioritizes the maturation of Emile’s senses such that they remain intimately connected to nature and necessity.

Rousseau wanted his Emile to, like Robinson Crusoe, concern himself only with his own development, according to his own standards and needs without worrying about

¹⁴⁹ See Allan Bloom who argues that in contrast to the “old way of using heroes in education was to make the pupil dissatisfied with himself and rivalrous with the model,” Crusoe is a hero that invites feelings of self-satisfaction and compassion in Emile (Bloom, 19). Bloom’s insight into Crusoe as Emile’s hero has been further explored by Christopher Kelly in “Rousseau’s Case for and against Heroes.” In his article, Kelly uses Crusoe to support his argument that “understood properly, Rousseau’s account of heroes develops a new understanding of heroism and its effects on ordinary people that is sensitive to the dangers of the heroes as well as of the benefits they confer” (Kelly, 347). The tutor insists that Emile maintain a critical stance toward his hero, and together they analyze his missteps and discuss what he could have done better; Bloom, “Introduction,” 8.

¹⁵⁰ Rousseau, 184; Allan Bloom, “Introduction,” in *Emile: Or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 8.

what others do or have in comparison. As James Delaney put it, “Proper education, for Rousseau, seeks to eliminate the conflict between what we are by our nature, and what society tells us we ought to be.”¹⁵¹ Rousseau sought to form a man who would be an antidote to what he describes in the *First Discourse* as the “herd that is called society,” where “a vile and deceiving uniformity prevails in morals, and all minds seem to have been cast in the same mold,” where “constantly one follows custom, never one's own genius,” and where “one no longer dares to appear what one is.”¹⁵² He wanted to create a man with a strong and independent sense of self who could resist the negative influences of a society obsessed with luxury and rank and who remains attuned to what is really essential in life.

The becoming of such a man is a fragile process, and in order to ensure he would develop properly, Rousseau posited that every aspect of the child’s education had to be considered from birth. He theorized that there are three factors that influence who we become: what we are given (“nature”), what we are taught by others (“men”), and what we are taught by our experience with the world (“things”). Nature is responsible for the development of our physical and internal capacities. Others must teach us how to use what we are given by nature, but in order for one to become “well-raised,” to achieve the kind of stable and consistent wholeness and harmony Rousseau thought ideal, the lessons of each of these “masters” must agree.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ James Delaney, *Starting with Rousseau* (London: Continuum, 2009), 68.

¹⁵² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Of the Social Contract and Other Political Writings* (London: Penguin, 2012), sec. 1.13.

¹⁵³ Rousseau, *Emile*, 1979, 38.

Rousseau likened the self to a plant: Nature provides the seedling and determines the potential of the plant. In *Emile* he wrote, “Plants are shaped by cultivation, and men by education. If man were born big and strong, his size and strength would be useless to him until he had learned to make use of them.”¹⁵⁴ Unlike animals, “We are born weak, we need strength; we are born totally unprovided, we need aid; we are born stupid, we need judgment. Everything we do not have at our birth and which we need when we are grown is given us by education.”¹⁵⁵ Like plants, humans require cultivation to achieve the potential determined by their nature. The proper environment for growth must be ensured.

Adults cannot control what nature gives their children; they cannot control their children’s experience of the world or every circumstance they will face, but they can, to some extent, control what they teach children through their words and example. This control is limited by the fact that even if one could regulate who sees a child, one would never be able to control how another behaves or speaks toward that child and the lessons that would follow. Education as socialization therefore leaves much to chance, but education as intentional teaching and learning seems to offer a measure of control over a child’s development, which is why Rousseau turns to it.

Given the level of attention and detail the tutor gives to Emile’s education, much has been made of how the child’s “natural” education is not really natural but artificial and contrived. Dana Villa, for example, claims that what seems like “like the natural

¹⁵⁴ Rousseau, 38.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

education of a ‘civilized savage’ is, in fact, the extremely careful and highly artificial isolation of an aristocratic child for a very special kind of tutorial relationship.”¹⁵⁶ This skepticism regarding Rousseau’s claim that Emile’s education is “natural” is linked to a broader debate in the literature regarding the role of nature in Rousseau’s political philosophy.

What does Rousseau mean by “natural”? Does it have any normative force? In what sense can Emile’s education rightly be called “natural”? With regard to the first question, readers of Rousseau have generally taken one of four main approaches to interpreting Rousseau’s sense of the word natural.¹⁵⁷ Drawing mainly on *The Social Contract* and the *Discourse on Inequality*, one strand associates Rousseau’s use of the word “natural” with the characteristics of an original, pre-societal state.¹⁵⁸ In this view, while the cultivated natural man represented by Emile is distinct from the noble savage ideal of the *Second Discourse*, Emile’s education is natural because he too is raised away

¹⁵⁶ Dana Villa, *Teachers of the People: Political Education in Rousseau, Hegel, Tocqueville, and Mill* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), 65.

¹⁵⁷ An exception, Ingrid Makus examines not just one but all four in “The Politics of ‘Feminine Concealment’ and ‘Masculine Openness.’”

¹⁵⁸ On this account, while the cultivated natural man represented by Emile is distinct from the noble savage ideal of the *Second Discourse*, his education is supposedly natural because he is raised away from society and toward self-sufficiency. As Leo Strauss argues, natural goodness “refers to two different types, who stand at the opposite poles of humanity (the primitive man and the wise) and who yet belong together as natural men, as self-sufficient beings, or ‘numerical units,’ in contradistinction to an intermediate type, the citizen or social man, that is, the man who is bound by duties or obligations and who is only a ‘fractionary unit’” (“On the Intention of Rousseau”). But while it’s true that Emile is taught to be independent and self-sufficient in many respects, this view is often challenged by those who point out the sociability and interdependence of Emile, particularly with respect to Sophie.

from society and toward self-sufficiency.¹⁵⁹ The fact that Emile's education is not aimed at civil society but at preserving the characteristics of man in the state of nature makes it natural. These interpretations often assume that Rousseau does not take nature to be a guide for political life,¹⁶⁰ and they tend to minimize the fact that while Emile is taught to be self-sufficient in many respects, he is also raised to be interdependent with Sophie.

Against readings that diminish the political and normative importance of nature for Rousseau, Laurence D. Cooper has argued that nature is not merely a pre-political starting point, but a guide that carries over into civil society.¹⁶¹ For him, nature remains as conscience when we move out of the state of nature, even as its presence becomes less meaningful. The idea that Rousseau's nature has an inward quality is echoed by Jeffrey Smith who notes that in *Emile*, "Rousseau construes 'nature' predominantly in terms of a principle immanent within man's given material."¹⁶² More recently, Jonathan Marks has turned away from nature as origins altogether, claiming that Rousseau's conception of nature is teleological. On his account, the natural in Rousseau is that which inevitably results as humans progress out of the state of nature. Calling Rousseau's work "a reflection on the natural perfection of the naturally disharmonious being," he argues that

¹⁵⁹ Strauss, Leo, "On the Intention of Rousseau," *Social Research* 14, no. 4 (1947): 455–87.

¹⁶⁰ For a helpful summary of Kantian, Straussian, and historicist interpretations of the normativity of nature in Rousseau, see Cooper, *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life*.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² Smith, Jeffrey A, "Natural Happiness, Sensation, and Infancy in Rousseau's 'Emile,'" *Polity* 35, no. 1 (2002): 93–120. 95.

true nature is achieved only after the state of nature.¹⁶³ Nature is not what is given, but the result of human development, and the capacities and characteristics that come after the state of nature are themselves natural.

Across both approaches, scholars have come to doubt whether nature has any real content for Rousseau, and many have come to think of nature in Rousseau a mere substitute for what he believes is good or useful.¹⁶⁴ Penny Weiss, for example, has consistently argued that Rousseau's apparent deference to nature on the question of gender is merely a rhetorical appeal.¹⁶⁵ This position is tempting when, in trying to make sense of the myriad ways Rousseau seems use the term natural, a stable definition seems impossible. But the content of Rousseau's nature becomes clearer when it is understood that for him nature is not only what is shared, but also what is given to each individual.

I argue that for Rousseau, the "natural" can refer to an inner potential that is neither incompatible with the idea of cultivation nor reducible to a broader idea of human nature. While all do share in a (gendered) human nature, Rousseau also believes that all are born with an inherent "natural" self that is particular to each person. In *Emile*, Rousseau seeks to cultivate a "natural" man who does not develop according to the

¹⁶³ Jonathan Marks, *Perfection and Disharmony in the Thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), 1.

¹⁶⁴ See Simpson, *Rousseau*, 133. See also Nicholas Dent, "The Basic Principle of Emile's Education," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 22, no. 2 (1988): 142 and *Rousseau: An Introduction to his Psychological, Social and Political Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 4.

¹⁶⁵ Penny Weiss, "Rousseau, Antifeminism, and Woman's Nature," *Political Theory* 15, no. 1 (February 1, 1987): 81–98 and *Gendered Community: Rousseau, Sex, and Politics* (New York: NYU Press, 1995)

opinions and expectations of others, but according to his authentic self. If the civil man is only a fraction, a numerator dependent on a denominator, the natural man is a whole number who finds his happiness within himself and for himself.¹⁶⁶

Being fundamentally good in its potential, Emile's natural self must be protected from distortion as he develops. To use Rousseau's imagery from botany: Emile is like a seed with his own unique potential; under the right conditions, he will grow and bloom with a wild, authentic, and natural beauty that should not be confused with that of a manicured garden, a "beauty" Rousseau rejects as too neat, false, and artificial.¹⁶⁷ As I will demonstrate, to dismiss Rousseau's natural education on the grounds that it actually involves a great deal of contrivance on the part of the tutor is to miss the point of what Rousseau means by a "natural" or "negative" education. This becomes clear when two corrections are made to existing interpretations of Rousseau.

First, readers of *Emile* tend to think of the title character as a template that can be applied to others, ignoring Rousseau's assertions of Emile's specificity and uniqueness. While Emile is indeed a model in some sense, one must be careful not to misplace the level of his universality. It is not the precise content of Emile's education that Rousseau wants imitated, but the fact that it is suited to his unique nature. Rousseau stresses this when he writes:

My examples, good perhaps for one pupil, will be bad for countless others. If one catches the spirit of these examples, one will surely know how to vary them according to need. The choice depends on the genius peculiar to each pupil, and the study of that genius depends on the occasions one offers each to reveal himself.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ Rousseau, *Emile*, 1979, 39-40.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

To “catch the spirit” of Rousseau’s examples is to realize that he advocates a method wherein each individual child is taken on his own terms and is carefully studied by the teacher. As the child’s nature is revealed, the content of the education is created accordingly. Again, Rousseau is explicit about this in *Emile*:

One must know well the particular genius of the child in order to know what moral diet suits him. Each mind has its own form, according to which it needs to be governed; the success of one's care depends on governing it by this form and not by another. Prudent man, spy out nature for a long time; observe your pupil well before saying the first word to him. To start with, let the germ of his character reveal itself freely; constrain it in no way whatsoever in order better to see the whole of it.¹⁶⁹

Rousseau advocates acting less, not more, in early childhood education because the natural character of the specific child needs time and space to develop. The teacher must wait to be guided by the child’s nature.

Each individual requires a tailored curriculum and a unique and dedicated teacher. This is why Rousseau asserts that “the same man can only give one education” and why he emphasizes the importance of mothers and fathers educating their own children.¹⁷⁰ The closest one could get to a truly individuated, private education where each child has his or her own dedicated tutor is through the immediate family. But this does not mean Rousseau really intended *Emile* as a handbook for parents; to the extent that Emile’s education is meant to be a model, it is only so in principle.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 192.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 94.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 51.

¹⁷¹ Rousseau corrects this misconception in *Letters Written from the Mountain*, trans. Christopher Kelly and Judith R. Bush (Hanover: UPNE, 2013), 211-212.

Rousseau needed to create Emile because his education aims at an ideal, but specific and authentic individual, not a generic model. Creating Emile allowed Rousseau to avoid talking in abstractions and to illustrate in a concrete sense what it would mean to put into practice the type of natural education he suggests. At the beginning of the work, Rousseau barely references Emile at all; by the end, he has completely overtaken the work and it becomes increasingly novelistic. The older the child gets in Rousseau's theory, and the more his nature is revealed, the more Rousseau must rely on the specific example of Emile to illustrate his education and the less he can speak in generalities.

Second, many students of Rousseau's political thought tend to overlook the connections between *Emile* and *Julie*, which is not only a coming-of-age story, but a text where Rousseau explicitly lays the groundwork for *Emile* and develops the basic principles of his philosophy of education. Many of the ideas elaborated in *Emile*, including what is meant by "natural" education, are usefully presented in *Julie* as a debate between Saint-Preux, Julie, and Wolmar, but *Julie* is often neglected by political theorists interested in Rousseau's theories of nature and education. Insisting on distinctions between Rousseau's "literary" and "philosophical" texts, scholars such as Nicholas Dent claim to see no relationship between the two and then use this as a justification to only study those texts written in a preferred form.¹⁷² The tendency to artificially divide Rousseau's works as political-philosophical and literary-autobiographical has created two different Rousseaus for two different disciplines, and the imposition of modern genre distinctions and groupings on Rousseau's work

¹⁷² Dent, *Rousseau*.

inevitably leads scholars to overlook important resources for fully understanding his thought.¹⁷³

In his *Confessions*, Rousseau explicitly groups *Julie* and *Emile* together. Referring to the controversy surrounding the Savoyard Vicar's views in *Emile* and identifying it with Heloise's views in *Julie*, he then adds, "Everything that is bold in *The Social Contract* was previously in the *Discourse on Inequality*; everything that was bold in *Emile* was previously in *Julie*."¹⁷⁴ Although Rousseau never explicitly framed *Emile* as a kind of sequel to *Julie*, it is notable that *Julie* ends with Saint-Preux being charged with educating her sons after her death and that *Emile*, published a year after *Julie*, elaborates and repeats many of the same points on education detailed in the novel.

Specifically, there is a key scene in *Julie* where Saint-Preux comments on how Julie and Wolmar are raising their children. Rousseau believes this scene to be so important that he deliberately selects it as one of only five scenes in the entire novel for engraving. During the conversation, Saint-Preux explicitly raises the question of educating children toward a predetermined ideal by, among other things, "correcting nature" to achieve that ideal.¹⁷⁵ This prompts an outburst from Wolmar who insists that nature needs no correction, as it is the educator who should be using nature as a guide. A "natural" education does not involve,

¹⁷³ Thomas Kavanagh, "Rousseau's The Levite of Ephraim: Synthesis within A 'Minor' Work," In *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, ed. Patrick Riley (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), 397.; See Joshua Cohen, *Rousseau: A Free Community of Equals* (New York: OUP, 2010), who follows John Rawls in grouping Rousseau's work into three stages each with their own purpose.

¹⁷⁴ Rousseau, *The Confessions and Correspondence, Including the Letters to Malesherbes*, Trans. Christopher Kelly. Hanover: UPNE, 2013), 342.

¹⁷⁵ Rousseau, *Julie, or the New Heloise*, 462.

as some scholars have argued Rousseau intends, the “suppression or correction” of natural tendencies.¹⁷⁶

The authoritative Wolmar, who acts as a mentor and friend to Saint-Preux, proceeds to instruct him: some individuals are born made are who they are irrespective of their education and circumstance. Others, however, are more plastic, and their characters are slower to develop. In those cases, “trying to form their mind before knowing it is to risk spoiling the good that nature has done and doing more harm in its place.”¹⁷⁷ Education can give us feelings and ideas that we are not innately born with, but it cannot give us “our dispositions for acquiring them.”¹⁷⁸ Whereas Wolmar is convinced that we are already born with the “diversity of minds and geniuses that distinguishes individuals,” Saint-Preux argues that this is the product of nurture, not nature, and so one should seek to harness the power of nurture to direct and determine the child’s character according to our ideals.¹⁷⁹

Wolmar then continues in an extraordinary passage where he asserts that one’s character ultimately depends on one’s temperament and that each individual has an authentic core that can be coerced but never truly changed.¹⁸⁰ Cultivating that core—which is not the same as molding that core—requires patience and careful study: “Once

¹⁷⁶ Marks, *Perfection and Disharmony*, 51.

¹⁷⁷ Rousseau, *Julie, or the New Heloise*, 463.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 463.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 462.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 463–64.

again the question is not to change the character and bend the natural disposition, but on the contrary to push it as far as it can go, to cultivate it and keep it from degenerating; for it is thus that a man becomes all he can be, and that nature's work is culminated in him by education."¹⁸¹ Character is not made but revealed, and once it is revealed, the teacher must act according to the specific, individual needs of the child.

Wolmar goes on, reiterating that "every man brings with him at birth a character, a genius, and talents that are peculiar to him."¹⁸² Those who will live in "country simplicity" are best left uninstructed, as they will be happier and it is unnecessary for the public good, but those who are in the "civil state," where their minds will be needed more than their physical labor, "it is important to learn to extract from men everything that nature has given them, to steer them in the direction where they can go farthest, and above all to foster their inclinations with everything that can make them useful."¹⁸³ Those in the first category have no need for an individuated education: "Only the species matters, each individual does what all the others do, example is the only rule, habit is the only talent, and each one makes use only of that part of his soul which is common to all."¹⁸⁴ In contrast, those in the second category do need individual nurturing, and for each child, "you follow him as far as nature leads him, and you will make of him the greatest of men if he has what it takes to become that."¹⁸⁵ As we can infer from

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 464.

¹⁸² Ibid., 464.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 464.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 464.

Rousseau's other work, whereas the first method is appropriate for forming citizens, the second is best for forming men.

Saint-Preux counters that such a hands-off approach to early education will result in stubborn and rebellious children with faults and bad habits, but Julie counters that she has avoided this problem by using the "yoke of necessity" so often referred to in *Emile*. And, following nature does not mean indulging every one of the child's impulses: appropriate limits must be set. There should never be bargaining or reasoning; what is granted is granted immediately without condition and all refusals are final. At the same time, Julie focuses on giving her children a happy childhood and refuses to sacrifice their early years for the sake of adulthood. Given the extent to which "nature" already subjects children, she makes them feel as free as possible while avoiding giving them a false sense of their own power. Julie's child is never made to believe "he is served more out of duty than pity;" he is made to feel his dependency as a kind of "humiliation" so that he "ardently aspire[s] to the time when he will be big and strong enough to have the honor of serving himself."¹⁸⁶ Feeling his dependency, he will know his place.¹⁸⁷ He will know he has "no authority but that of benevolence," and this will make him want to be loveable, which will in turn teach him to love, and "this reciprocal affection, born of equality" leads to "good qualities."¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 465.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 467.

¹⁸⁷ This is yet another reason why Rousseau thinks it is so important for mothers to raise their children instead of servants and nannies. A child should not think he is the master of the people on whom his existence depends (Rousseau, *Julie*, 467).

¹⁸⁸ Rousseau, *Julie, or the New Heloise*, 468.

From this scene, one can draw several conclusions about what cultivating natural man truly means for Rousseau. In the context of education, nature refers to a concrete set of inherent capacities and dispositions unique to each individual which, in certain social and political contexts—namely, modern ones—should serve as the guide for development. Using nature as a guide does not mean giving a child complete freedom or secretly molding him as one sees fit; it means patiently nurturing the child according to his “natural” individual character and potential, features that Rousseau believes can be observed with careful attention. It further means teaching him to yield to necessity, and making him realize that the natural order and way of the world has made him weak, dependent, and unable to fully understand things or to reason until he is grown.

In adhering to the child’s “natural” inner core, natural education entails a serious commitment to authenticity,¹⁸⁹ a commitment which is, contrary to Todorov’s suggestion, not necessarily devoid of moral content.¹⁹⁰ Although Julie expresses some skepticism regarding Womar’s position on this particular point, in a footnote Rousseau as the editor affirms his agreement with the idea that there are “no mistakes in nature.”¹⁹¹ Womar elaborates:

All the vices we attribute to natural disposition are the effect of the wrong shapes it has received. There is no villain whose inclinations better channeled would not

¹⁸⁹ In stressing the role of authenticity in Rousseau, I align myself with interpretations that note Rousseau’s focus on “transparency” (Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*), “sincerity” (Melzer, “Rousseau and the Modern Cult of Sincerity”), and the distinction between “truth and illusion” (Schaefer, *Rousseau on Education, Freedom, and Judgment*).

¹⁹⁰ Tzvetan Todorov, *Frail Happiness: An Essay on Rousseau*, New edition edition (University Park, Pa.; London: Penn State University Press, 2004), 61–62.

¹⁹¹ Rousseau, *Julie, or the New Heloise*, 461.

have yielded great virtues. There is no wronghead from whom useful talents would not have been obtained from it by taking a certain tack with him.¹⁹²

Because our natural dispositions are fundamentally good, being true to them does lead to goodness.¹⁹³ Again, it is critical to note that Rousseau is referring to the natural goodness of a complex constellation of distinctly individual and unique dispositions, of *individual* human natures and not simply of a basic, shared, and generic human nature.

It is only when natural characters and dispositions are malformed and distorted that they become non-ideal. In other words, children lose their inherent natural goodness when external forces in society fail to recognize their nature and nurture them according to it. When adults try to distort and channel children toward “unnatural” ends—that is, ends that disagree with the child’s authentic, natural dispositions—problems arise. In contrast to “unnatural” education, natural education does not seek to change or force the child’s unique nature; it refuses to treat children as blank slates to be molded according to the desires of the adults around them.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Rousseau, 461.

¹⁹³ If there is any doubt about whether this is truly Rousseau’s view and not simply that of Wolmar and Julie’s consider not only the consistency of this view with the ideas advanced in *Emile*, but also the following passage in *The Dialogues* where “Rousseau” the character describes the author of *Emile* as such: “He devoted his greatest and best book to showing how the harmful passions enter our souls, how good education must be purely negative, that it must consist not in curing the vices of the human heart—for there are no such vices naturally—but in preventing them from being born and in keeping tightly shut the passages through which they enter” (23). Later in *The Dialogues*, the “Frenchman” character further describes *Emile* as “nothing but a treatise on the original goodness of man, destined to show how vice and error, foreign to his constitution, enter it from outside and insensibly change him” (213).

¹⁹⁴ A similar logic applies to Rousseau’s view of societies, which should avoid appropriating grand plans and practices that do not suit their situation and existing constitution (Rousseau, *Dialogues*, 213).

Finally, Rousseau's natural education is perhaps best understood in contrast to an "artificial" education which only trains children to learn through and for the sake of their *amour propre* instead of their *amore de soi*.¹⁹⁵ "Artificial" education flatters children, raises them to be vain, and leads them to think that their happiness depends on the admiration of others. Rousseau's goal is an adult who is himself for himself and not to please others. He is critical of "educated" children who gain the admiration of adults for doing and saying things they do not truly understand. These children parrot and imitate adults to please them, becoming who others want them to be instead of becoming the best version of themselves. Ultimately, this kind of education only exacerbates the undesired split between the child's nature, or authentic self, and his social self.

These premises explain why Rousseau insisted that it is up to Emile to "desire," "seek," and "find" what he wants to learn. The teacher's job is to "put it within his reach, skillfully to give birth to this desire and to furnish him with the means of satisfying it."¹⁹⁶ Questions will and should come from the student, not the teacher. The teacher's questions should be "infrequent but well chosen."¹⁹⁷ While the child should decide what he wants to learn, the tutor should guide him and channel his curiosity to what is useful for him to know in and of itself. This is less about valuing utility in education than it is about

¹⁹⁵ As David Bromwich put it, Rousseau "defends a self that is inward, a self that does not exist merely in the opinion of others. His perception, and it was never in the history of human feelings an obvious one, is that society cannot do anything to assist this principle or germ of the self. It can only allow it to exist. We are compelled to respect the self by virtue of its existence as such, not for any attribute or quality or property" ("Rousseau and the Self without Property," 298).

¹⁹⁶ Rousseau, *Emile*, 1979, 179.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 179.

rejecting learning motivated by vanity; that is, wanting to know things only for the sake of feeling superior and showing others he knows them. Rousseau would “prefer a hundred times over that [Emile] not learn what he would only learn out of jealousy or vanity.”¹⁹⁸

Those who learn according to their nature are also more likely to retain what they learn. Rousseau notes that it is common for adults to “forget and lose” what they learn, and this is because education is “certainly only habit,” which means it is tenuous and always liable to revert to nature.¹⁹⁹ Education can manipulate and distort nature, but the effect only lasts as long as the teaching and learning continues. This idea is reinforced in Rousseau’s exordium to the *Second Discourse* where he states that “education and habits” can “deprave” but not “destroy” “the qualities [man] received.”²⁰⁰ It is also illustrated in *Emile* through botany: when plants are made to grow in a non-vertical direction, against their inclination, their inner nature is not altered. They can be forced to change their natural course, but while they will at first continue according to their acquired habit, once set free: “the sap has not as a result [of this interference] changed its original direction; and if the plant continues to grow, its new growth resumes the vertical direction.”²⁰¹ So too, Rousseau muses, it is with men. Rousseau thinks individuals can force certain habits against nature, and he admits those habits will stick so long as the

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 184.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 39.

²⁰⁰ Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, Exordium, 133

²⁰¹ Rousseau, *Emile*, 1979, 39.

person's circumstances remain the same, but "as soon as the situation changes, habit ceases and the natural returns."²⁰² Habit does not erase nature. Education can change our behavior but not our fundamental dispositions.²⁰³

Rousseau's education is "natural" because it does not seek to force certain habits into Emile against his nature. Instead, the "curriculum" is designed around Emile's experience and perspective. It is, in short, education as socialization, but carefully planned and customized to the individual child. It is not transmission: The child is not told to be good and virtuous and then made to practice habits of goodness and virtue; he is put in situations that feel completely authentic and real to him. He is given ideal conditions for growth, that is, experiences which will draw out the best in him. Many of these situations may be contrived by the tutor, but Emile's reactions and responses to them are authentic and natural, and they result in a self who is authentic and natural. There is no disconnect between who Emile really is and who his education has made him because the habits and behaviors he develops are grounded in his unique nature and real experience of the world.

To be clear, Rousseau's commitment to the existence of a fixed and singular individual nature should not be confused with the view that individuals necessarily have a higher claim than the community, or that the public good is the mere sum total of

²⁰² Rousseau, 39.

²⁰³ As Wolmar says in *Julie*, "It would be vain to pretend to remold a variety of minds on a common model. You can coerce them and not change them: you can prevent men from showing themselves as they are, but not make them become other; and if they disguise themselves in the ordinary course of life, you will see them in all important occasions revert to their original character, and revert to it with all the less restraint that they know no more restraint when they do so (464).

individual desires, or that individuals lack obligations. Scholars like Robert N. Bellah who struggle to reconcile Rousseau's individualism with his collectivism struggle for two reasons: first, they fail to see that Rousseau's support for individualism is dependent on the given social and political context. Second, they tend to root Rousseau's commitment to individualism in the idea that man is solitary in the state of nature, or in biographic reasons such as his mother's death and his father leaving him as a child, or in the influences of the modern political philosophy tradition. There is a conflation of individualism with independence, when in fact one can simultaneously appreciate the unique individuality of every person while believing in interdependence and obligation. The individuality Rousseau advocates is one which is secure in itself and its judgments, has little use for comparison and competition, and seeks to do good.²⁰⁴

Achieving Rousseau's "natural" education demands effort and artifice, to be sure, but it's in service of giving Emile room to grow at his own pace and according to his needs. The potential for virtue and goodness is already inside Emile and will develop on its own provided the right set of experiences occur at the right time. When Rousseau writes, "What must be done is to prevent anything from being done,"²⁰⁵ he means that the tutor must protect the child from experiences and influences that will corrupt and distort his natural, inner potential. As Rousseau says in *Considerations on the Government of*

²⁰⁴ Irving Babbitt misreads Rousseau as glorifying individuality and non-conformity at the expense of morality. Rousseau did not disdain culture and convention because he wished to glorify novelty or individuality for its own sake, but because he thought society was capable of aspiring toward authentic goodness and virtue and not merely the appearance of it. For a fuller critique of Babbitt, see David Lay Williams's "Transcendent Standards in Rousseau?"

²⁰⁵ Rousseau, *Emile*, 1979, 41.

Poland, “I cannot repeat often enough that good education has to be negative. Prevent vices from arising, you will have done enough for virtue.”²⁰⁶ As Geraint Parry notes, Rousseau’s “negative” education is perhaps more aptly named “defensive” or “protective” education.²⁰⁷ This prevention occurs by managing Emile’s formative experiences but *not* by forcing him to practice habits and behaviors for the sake of pleasing others.

Cultivating natural man does not mean letting nature run its course with no intervention, but it does demand a God-like insight into the inner nature and world of the child. Although Rousseau begins Book I of the *Emile* lamenting how man “wants nothing as nature made it, not even man” and how “for him, man must be trained like a school horse [and] fashioned in keeping with his fancy like a tree in his garden,” he also writes that no intervention would lead to worse outcomes. Humans are only partially formed when they are born, and “in the present state of things,” it is inevitable that “prejudices, authority, necessity, example, [and] all the social institutions in which we find ourselves submerged would stifle nature,” leaving “nothing in its place.”²⁰⁸ So, “in the present state of things a man abandoned to himself in the midst of other men from birth would be the most disfigured of all.”²⁰⁹ Natural man must be educated to survive in the modern world: he must be cultivated but not ornamented.

²⁰⁶ Rousseau, “Considerations on the Government of Poland,” 191.

²⁰⁷ Parry, “*Émile: Learning to Be Men, Women, and Citizens*,” 252.

²⁰⁸ Rousseau, *Emile*, 1979, 37.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

Again, the goal for Rousseau was to ensure the child would develop free from negative societal influences until he blooms into a man made for himself and no one else. In cultivating “natural man” the tutor is not attempting to recreate a man from the state of nature. As Rousseau cautioned, “There is a great difference between the natural man living in the state of nature and the natural man living in the state of society. Emile is not a savage to be relegated to the desert. He is a savage made to inhabit cities.”²¹⁰ At the same time, the tutor does not attempt to mold him according to a preconceived image. The tutor raises the child away from the corrupting influences of society *and* according to the child’s innate and singular nature.

Of course, Rousseau recognized that while the tutor can hope to shield Emile from being made for other men and from concerning himself with their opinions of him, certain formative experiences cannot be indefinitely delayed or controlled. Chief among them is Emile’s experience of love and passion. Unlike Plato, who in *The Republic* suggested men and women might be made indifferent to one another, Rousseau determined that man will inevitably care about the opinion of a woman he loves and desires. He will see himself through her eyes. Cultivating natural man will therefore require careful guidance through this stage of development.

As his own autobiographical writings confirm, Rousseau believed that sexual development plays a pivotal role in self-formation and that properly delaying and channeling this development is key to his project.²¹¹ Love and passion are “the most

²¹⁰ Rousseau, 205.

²¹¹ In reflecting on his life in *The Confessions* and *The Dialogues*, many of his formative memories have to do with his sexual development. He emphasizes the extent to which he

difficult part of the whole of education—the crisis that serves as a passage from childhood to man’s estate.”²¹² Emile is not only incomplete without a female partner, he needs her—or at least the idea of her—to ensure his education is properly completed. Emile must be taught to love truth, beauty, and virtue, and he does this in part through loving an honest, beautiful and virtuous woman. It is crucial that he not only fall in love with the right woman, but that she serves the tutor’s educational goals.

In Book V of *Emile*, Rousseau infamously detailed the separate education of Sophie, Emile’s ideal woman.²¹³ From the beginning, readers of Rousseau have objected to Sophie’s education as inconsistent with his commitments to freedom and equality²¹⁴ or

was a “late-bloomer,” as well as his early innocence and naïveté regarding women. And, while many scholars point to *Robinson Crusoe* as a model of economic self-sufficiency, few emphasize the fact that unlike most novels or romances, it is devoid of sex and love. As Ian Watt notes, “Love plays little part in Crusoe’s own life, and that even the temptations of sex are excluded from the scene of his greatest triumphs, the island.” (65) Marriage comes much later, only after financial security, and “all he tells us of this supreme human adventure is that it was 'not either to my disadvantage or dissatisfaction'. This, the birth of three children, and his wife's death, however, comprise only the early part of a sentence, which ends with plans for a further voyage” (68). Rousseau’s praise of the novel for educational purposes therefore makes all the more sense, given the desire to carefully control and defer Emile’s sexual passions and desires. Even Watt misses this connection, attributing Rousseau’s praise of Crusoe to its “realisation of intellectual freedom” and the fact that Crusoe “enjoys the absolute freedom of social restrictions for which Rousseau yearned” (86).

²¹² Rousseau, *Emile*, 1979, 415–16.

²¹³ Susan Okin claims Rousseau has two education models for boys—one civic and one private—but only one model for girls, shared by both Julie and Sophie. On her reading, only boys are raised to be “autonomous individuals,” (“Rousseau’s Natural Woman,” 15). But as I will argue, Julie and Sophie do not share the same education and both exhibit more strength and autonomy than Okin’s sweeping criticism suggests. Moreover, as many have pointed out, Emile and Sophie share a mutual dependence.

²¹⁴ For the opposite view, see Susan Meld Shell’s “Émile: Nature and the Education of Sophie,” where she insists that Rousseau’s treatment of women “follows with rigorous

dismissed his view of women as pathological or explained away by historical contextualization. While some have tried to ignore or detach his theory of female education from the rest of his thought, others have insisted that Rousseau's investment in sexual differentiation and the patriarchal family is of crucial political, institutional, and theoretical significance to his thought.²¹⁵ More recently, Denise Schafer has even argued that Sophie's education is actually superior to that of Emile.²¹⁶

Sophie and Emile's educations are, on my reading, both aimed at private virtue and both interdependent, although not equally so. Contra Penny Weiss, Rousseau's investment in sexual differentiation was not merely utilitarian but based on a belief in natural differences between men and women.²¹⁷ Rousseau believed it is possible for

consistency from his position, [...] on human nature and its implications for the modern human condition" (273).

²¹⁵ See, for example, Elizabeth Wingrove's *Rousseau's Republican Romance* where she argues that "possibility of securing a stable republican community turns on the interaction between men and women and, likewise, the proper organization of sexual desire turns on securing a stable political rule" (5).

²¹⁶ Schafer argues that despite Sophie's internal division, she is in fact "more intellectually and morally independent than Emile" ("Reconsidering the Role of Sophie in Rousseau's *Emile*," 610). She also challenges the idea that Rousseau is necessarily committed to achieving "wholeness," as it appears, on her account, that Sophie's dividedness is precisely what allows for Rousseau's vision of happiness and freedom. Schaeffer insists that wholeness was not merely intended for men and insists that feminist accounts have oversimplified and mischaracterized Rousseau's account of female education. Rousseau "expects a woman to make rational and moral judgments, to see the difference between appearance and substance, to see the big picture" and to avoid "unreflective dependency upon public opinion" even as she takes it into account (613). Ultimately, "the relationship of Sophie and Emile is neither a perfect whole with two complementary parts, nor a strict hierarchy. Both formulations are too static to capture the precarious instability—and the mobilization of that instability—that Rousseau sees as essential to our interdependence" (624).

²¹⁷ In his *Discourse on Political Economy*, Rousseau is quite clear that biology tips the scales of power and authority away from women and toward men. In the family, one

women to be more like men in the same way he thought children could be raised against their inner nature. In both cases he thought it best to follow nature's guidance. At the same time, he did not think women could and should only occupy a self-sacrificial and subordinate role so that men can attain civic virtue. The virtue Rousseau was concerned with in *Emile* is a private kind of virtue tied to moderating desires; It is a kind of virtue that Emile and Sophie both aspire to achieve, as well as Julie and Saint-Preux.

I further maintain that Rousseau's objectionable treatment of women in Book V reflects the tremendous and decisive power he believed they hold over men.²¹⁸ As he wrote to women in the Epistle Dedicatory to his Second Discourse, "It will always be the lot of your sex to govern ours."²¹⁹ Women are "that precious half of the Republic which

authority must be final, and "regardless of how slight the incapacities specific to women may be thought to be; since they invariably impose intervals of inaction on her, this is a sufficient reason to exclude her from this primacy: for when the balance is perfectly equal, a straw is enough to tip it" (3). Moreover, whereas a mother has no doubt that her children are hers, the father has no such security and must therefore "be able to review his wife's conduct" to ensure he is raising and supporting his own (3).

²¹⁸ Much has been made of Rousseau's treatment of women in Book V of *Emile*, but in addition to reading him in his historical context, it's important to note the extent to which Rousseau felt threatened, influenced, and controlled by women. He admits to secretly fantasizing about women dominating him, and his early sexual experiences were all with older women. In Paris, he saw women as the gatekeepers of the philosophical and literary world. They dictated the culture and landscape of the intellectual world: they ran the salons, and it was on their favor that he depended. The extent to which he came to resent this is evident in his falling out with Madame D'Epainay. He felt that accepting her patronage in effect stifled him and made him obligated to her. Finally, being with his life partner and eventual wife—tellingly, a woman he claims was inferior to him and who was wholly dependent on him—this meant further submitting himself to the manipulations of his mother-in-law. Kenneth Wain rightly argues in *On Rousseau: An Introduction* that we should not psychologize Rousseau as wanting women to be subjugated because of his negative personal experiences with them, but I cite these examples not to claim that Rousseau is motivated to be vindictive against women but only to demonstrate the extent to which he felt and believed in their existing power, which in turn greatly influenced his views.

causes the other's happiness, and whose gentleness and wisdom preserve its peace and good morals." Women are both the downfall and the potential saving grace of men.

Properly educated, they could lead men to greatness and virtue. As he noted in a footnote to the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*:

I am far from thinking that this ascendancy of women is in itself an evil. It is a gift bestowed upon them by nature of rite happiness of Mankind: better directed, it might produce as much good as it nowadays does harm. We are not sufficiently sensible to the benefits that would accrue to society if the half of Mankind which governs the other were given a better education. Men will always be what it pleases women that they be: so that if you want them to become great and virtuous, teach women what greatness of soul and virtue is.²²⁰

This last sentence is key: a tutor's influence cannot hope to compete with man's desire to impress a woman. For Emile, his first love will be his first passion of any kind, and it will decide "the final form of his character," solidifying "his way of thinking, his sentiments, and his tastes."²²¹ The relationship the tutor has with Emile will never be able to form him in the same way his first love will.

The power Rousseau believed women have over male development explains why he argued that women's education should be entirely oriented around their supposed duties to men and why, from childhood, a woman should be taught "to please men, to be useful to them, to make herself loved and honored by them, to raise them when young, to care for them when grown, to counsel them, to console them, to make their lives agreeable and sweet."²²² She is a woman who no longer poses a serious threat to Emile's

²¹⁹ Rousseau, *The Social Contract: And, The First and Second Discourses*, ed. Susan Dunn (Yale University Press, 2002), 121.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

²²¹ Rousseau, *Emile*, 1979, 416.

²²² *Ibid.*, 540.

development and the goals of his education. Such a woman would be nothing like the modern women Rousseau criticized, whose natural innocence, purity, and simplicity of mind have been ruined by society.

In order to ensure Emile falls for the right woman, the tutor must plant the idea of her in advance. Like Emile, this woman called Sophie must be educated according to nature, and this will, on Rousseau's account, stress their fundamental, sex-based differences. Sophie will therefore be very different from Emile, but this will generate a complimentary, interdependent partnership. By making his pupil fall in love with the image of Sophie, the tutor hopes to ensure that Emile will settle for nothing less than the closest he can find to the ideal woman.

In fact, both Emile and Sophie are to have their minds imbued with ideal images of one another before ever meeting. While Emile's tutor describes the ideal woman to him, Sophie falls in love with the hero of her favorite book, *Telemachus*. Emile proceeds to search for his ideal Sophie everywhere he travels, Sophie insists on comparing everyone to Telemachus. When Sophie is sent to the city and introduced into society by her aunt, she refuses to settle for a suitor who does not resemble her hero. And when Emile and Sophie finally do meet, they recognize one another as embodiments of their respective idealizations.

But Emile is not Telemachus and Sophie is not the Sophie of the tutor's stories. Both Emile and Sophie are unique individuals, and we know this because Rousseau tells us so: In Book V it is revealed that the tutor initially planned to raise Emile and Sophie alongside one another and for one another at the outset. He abandons this idea, however, realizing that to do so would be to confuse "what is natural in the savage state with what

is natural in the civil state.” Whereas in the former state all “natural” men would be equally suited to all “natural” women and essentially interchangeable, in the civil state “each character is developed by social institutions and each mind has received its particular and determinate form not just from education alone but from the well-ordered or ill-ordered conjunction of nature and education.”²²³ The modern natural man and the modern natural women are individuals. The particularity of each individual in modernity is critical. This is why Emile and Sophie cannot be destined for one another in advance, they must meet each other after they have developed as individuals and then decide whether they are suited to one another.

Therefore, while it may appear as though Rousseau proposes generic templates of ideal men and women, all of whom would be equally suited to one another, this is not the case. Sophie is Sophie not because of an educational formula that could be replicated to create innumerable Sophies. She has a particular nature and set of experiences that complement Emile’s, and together they complete one another’s education. Emile’s Sophie is not a perfect and ultimately impossible being, she is a resuscitated Sophie.

The fact that the tutor changed his mind and decided *not* to raise Emile and Sophie alongside one another further proves that while Rousseau certainly believed many of the educational practices in Emile should be adopted more widely, he never intended the work as a handbook on how to create copies of either Emile or Sophie. To read the book in this way is to miss Rousseau’s insistence on the unique individual potential of each person from birth. In civil society all children are not the same because no child will

²²³ Ibid., 406.

ever have the exact same nature and the exact same environment. Rousseau's individuated model of education as socialization does not necessarily scale up in its particulars, only in the general idea that the child's individual nature must be observed and his environment curated accordingly. Emile and Sophie are ideals constructed to critique "artificial" education and prove a point about natural goodness. They could never be replicated through a standard program of education, and to seek to mold children into a predetermined image would defeat the whole purpose of natural education.

By extension, Emile's education as socialization is antithetical to the one proposed by Plato, where institutions which teach students in groups and batches, use the same lessons on the same students, and encourage them to compete with one another while worrying about how they are viewed by their peers. Such institutions which claim to be forming men or forming women en masse are really claiming to shape children toward a predetermined template, a model that may be unnatural to the individual child. This is not Rousseau's project in *Emile*, a project which demands privacy, careful observation, and minimal socialization—conditions that are only possible in a one-on-one tutorship model of education.

Unfortunately, both in theory and in practice, readers of Rousseau have failed to see that his idea of cultivating natural men and women is wholly opposed to the notion of molding men and women according to specific, external, and pre-determined ideals.²²⁴ They have sought to apply Emile to dictate an education as transmission, when it's actually a theory of individualized socialization. The dire consequences of

²²⁴ For an account of how Rousseau's *Emile* influenced French educational culture and practice, see Jennifer J. Popiel's *Rousseau's Daughters*.

misinterpreting Rousseau in this way are evident in one of Rousseau's contemporaries, the English author and abolitionist Thomas Day (1748-1789). Having read *Emile* and seeking to recreate a Sophie for himself, he infamously decided to adopt one eleven-year-old and one twelve-year-old girl for this purpose. Naming them Sabrina Sidney and Lucretia, he hoped that at least one of them could be successfully raised according to Rousseau's educational principles. Letters and memoirs suggest that Day seemed "less committed to raising real children than to acting out an ideal of physical and moral perfection."²²⁵ Within a few years, it became apparent that Lucretia would have to be married to someone else. Sabrina, who was supposedly less resistant, stayed with him a bit longer before being sent to boarding school. Day's treatment of Sabrina was cruel: he not only fired pistols at her, he "dropped melted sealing wax on her arms" in an attempt "to inure her to fear and pain."²²⁶ Although they allegedly did almost marry, Day's experiment with Sabrina also failed in the end. Day took the idea of education as an all-powerful means of achieving a pre-determined ideal to an extreme Rousseau never would have supported. The idea that a woman could be raised up "for" another—even from birth—was not a project Rousseau believed in or endorsed. Children are not blank slates and teachers are not gods. Emile and Sophie must be raised separately, find one another, and freely choose to be together.

²²⁵ Julia V. Douthwaite, *The Wild Girl, Natural Man, and the Monster: Dangerous Experiments in the Age of Enlightenment*, 1 edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 136.

²²⁶ Douthwaite, 140.

Once Emile does meet Sophie and goes on to fall in love with her, he is almost fully formed but not yet complete. Emile is good but not yet virtuous. He is enslaved by his desires and ruled by his heart. In contrast, the virtuous man “knows how to conquer his affections; for then he follows his reason and his conscience; he does his duty; he keeps himself in order, and nothing can make him deviate from it.”²²⁷ In order to complete his education, Emile must leave Sophie, and it is this struggle that will make him a virtuous man.

Emile must travel and conquer his passion toward Sophie in order to return worthy of her. It is only at this stage that Emile goes on to learn about politics and citizenship. He learns about law and civic duty not because they are the ultimate goal of his education, but because he needs to know them. Becoming a member of the state is not the ultimate purpose of Emile’s education; it is a duty which follows from being the head of a family. Emile’s education ends with him not as a great citizen or a great leader, but in the most “natural” role of all—as a husband and father-to-be.

Education as Self-Formation

Rousseau is fascinated by the question of how adults become who they are and how critical moments and influences shape them into unique individuals. While he does have a Platonic idea of education for citizenship, his self-proclaimed greatest work is more preoccupied with the becoming of an individual self as opposed to that of a society. On his account, education is both the key to an ideal society and the antidote to a corrupt

²²⁷ Rousseau, *Emile*, 1979, 444–45.

one. But Rousseau's optimism was limited, and *Emile* is not simply a proposal for how ideal individuals might be "made" by teachers. Not only did Rousseau reject education as transmission, he had a far more complex idea of the individual self than such a reading would suggest.

First, Rousseau did not view of the self as a unified whole that becomes fixed and complete upon reaching adulthood. Despite its reputation as evidence of Rousseau's paranoia, Rousseau's *Dialogues* offer the clearest illustration of his theory of the modern self.²²⁸ In this work, Rousseau is the author, but "Rousseau" is also a character who judges "Jean-Jacques" alongside a Frenchman. This three-way split reveals the basic features of the fractured self that Rousseau claims is a function of civil society: We live and exist in the world in our own eyes, in the eyes of others, and in reality. There is an authentic, natural self that wants to be realized, and we are more than what our outward actions and behaviors may suggest. This "true" self exists before politics, and a proper education which uses it as a guide can lead to a developed self who is good and whole.

Second, Rousseau is the first to admit that the likelihood of a tutor successfully cultivating a natural, virtuous man by design is very low. In *Emile* he warns, "when education becomes an art, it is almost impossible for it to succeed, since the conjunction

²²⁸ Later in his life, Rousseau appears to have become increasingly narcissistic and paranoid. He was aware of how paradoxical he seemed, and yet he insisted, more than once in writing, that he had a coherent system, and that any true lover of the truth demanded accepting paradox. Rousseau was incredibly frustrated at being misunderstood. Dissatisfied with the reception of his *Confessions*, he wrote the *Dialogues* to show how he should properly be judged. He had at this point, as Kelly and Masters note, lost hope in the idea that if you just convey the facts and lay yourself bare, people will see you for what you are. But Rousseau was not only dissatisfied with how his contemporaries saw his life and his actions; he was concerned with how he would be remembered after his death.

of the elements necessary to its success is in no one's control.²²⁹ All that one can do by dint of care is to come more or less close to the goal, but to reach it requires luck.”²³⁰

That is to say, no one can completely control a person's environment and education, and so no outcome is guaranteed by education.²³¹

Again, this point appears to have been missed in the mistaken reception of *Emile* as a work of education as transmission, and may help explain why Rousseau felt compelled to write the unfinished sequel, *Emile et Sophie, or the Solitaires*.²³² From *Emile's* conclusion, it appears as though the tutor successfully cultivated Emile into an ideal man destined for a private, happy family life. His progress having been assessed at

²²⁹ Masters was wrong, then, to believe that Emile cannot be realized because it is mired in contradiction (41). It is not an irresolvable tension between “art” and “nature,” but the need for complete knowledge and control that proves beyond human capability. Emile cannot be realized because only a god could provide such an individually tailored and perfectly controlled education.

²³⁰ Rousseau, *Emile*, 1979, 38.

²³¹ Even if one could agree that the adult self is a stable, final end product and that education could in fact produce reliable results, it is neither clear what the end point should be or who should define that end. Rousseau's own definition of what makes an ideal woman is a case in point. In describing Sophie, the ideal woman for his ideal man, Rousseau stresses that she possesses many qualities he believes to be “natural” to women which were disputed in his own time and still are today.?

²³² In his *Confessions* Rousseau claims that Emile's sequel will endeavor to teach what the “frivolous” public has not been able to see, “this great maxim of morality, perhaps the only one of use in practice, to avoid situations that put our duties in opposition with our interests, and which show us our good in the harm of someone else: certain that what-ever sincere love of virtue one brings to such situations, sooner or later one weakens without being aware of it, and one becomes unjust and bad in fact, without having ceased to be just and good in the soul” (47). In other words, one is always susceptible to the corruption of one's environment: no education, not even one as well-designed as Emile's, could result in a fully fixed and immovable self. The tutor is *not* all powerful and the success of his project is dependent on the cooperation of Emile's environment and circumstances.

each stage and deemed satisfactory, Emile reaches the final stage of his development and appears complete. By contrast, from what exists of the unfinished *Les Solitaires*, it seems as though the tutor's education was a failure: Emile's marriage implodes, domestic happiness becomes impossible, and the tutor is nowhere to be found.

On my reading, a fixed and stable end point of domestic bliss could never be the final goal of a Rousseauian education.²³³ The core of Emile's education was never a tutor's lessons, but the set of life experiences and circumstances he encountered. As Rousseau wrote in *Emile*, "He among us who best knows how to bear the goods and the ills of this life is to my taste the best raised: from which it follows that the true education consists less in precept than in practice. We begin to instruct ourselves when we begin to live."²³⁴ Living—that is, learning—does not cease with childhood. If anything, true learning only begins after childhood, once reason has emerged and developed.

Rousseau's resistance to the idea of an adult self as a finished product of education is highlighted in the radical presentism Emile expresses in *Les Solitaires*:

I said to myself that in fact we are never doing anything but beginning, and that there is no connection in our existence other than a succession of present moments, the first of which is always the one that is happening. We die and we are born every instant of our lives, and what interest can death leave us?²³⁵

²³³ "But everything connected with man feels the effects of his transitoriness. Everything is finite and everything is fleeting in human life; and if the state which makes us happy lasted endlessly, the habit of enjoying it would take away our taste for it. If nothing changes from without, the heart changes. Happiness leaves us, or we leave it" (*Emile*, 447).

²³⁴ Rousseau, *Emile*, 1979, 42.

²³⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: Or On Education (Includes Emile and Sophie, or the Solitaires)*, ed. Christopher Kelly, trans. Allan Bloom and Christopher Kelly, 1 edition (Hanover, N.H: UPNE, 2009), 705.

This statement suggests that we are neither our past nor our future plans; we are who we are every moment of our lives. Therefore, the best education will teach us to be at peace with our existence, a peace that will always come under threat as our environment changes.

At the same time, we should never come to hate who we were, and this is key to “preserving” the work of education.²³⁶ To value only what we become, to dismiss childhood as the process of becoming someone better, is to teach a kind of rejection of our existence. We should “always love to do what is good,” never minding when we started doing it.”²³⁷ Education can only do so much against chance and environment; whatever happens in spite of our education, we should never give up on striving for goodness and virtue,

This striving is what Sophie exemplifies in *Les Solitaires*, which is not at all an “undeniable testimony to the failure of the ideal female education.”²³⁸ After becoming pregnant by another man, Sophie has the chance to hide her affair from Emile, but she does not. That is, although she succumbs to the temptations of her environment, she does not lie to Emile or attempt to trick him into thinking the resulting child is his, which she would have been able to do had she accepted his advances instead of being honest. Despite her moral lapse, she is not truly bad or immoral at heart. In a way, she remains

²³⁶ Rousseau, 432.

²³⁷ Rousseau, 432.

²³⁸ Susan Moller Okin, “The Fate of Rousseau’s Heroines,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, ed. Lynda Lange (Penn State Press, 2002), 92.

honorable and good, even though the influences of her environment led her to behave otherwise.

For Rousseau, one's life experiences and circumstances, both of which are always subject to accident and fortune, will always be critical to one's becoming. This is precisely what distinguishes his model of private education from traditional teaching and learning methods, and this is why when fulfilling his desire to reveal himself as a completed and coherent self in his autobiography, Rousseau chose to do so through a complete account of the events of his life and his reflections on them. We are not the end product of any one authority; the only true teacher is life. *Emile* is therefore not an instructional template with a guaranteed finished product, but a meditation on the limits and possibilities of education as teaching and learning toward individual virtue. He takes the insight of education as socialization—that we are not the product of teachings but of our external influences—and applies them to education as teaching as learning.

Education as Imaginary Socialization

As I have shown, Rousseau asserted that when it is a matter of education for becoming, education as socialization is key to both becoming ideal citizens *and* ideal individuals. In *theory*, creating a man like *Emile* who is educated toward his good inner nature rather than external pressures and expectations demands a private education stripped of all the corrupting influences of modern society. His socialization must be carefully controlled by an all-powerful tutor, but this is a feat not possible in practice. However, *realistically*, modern culture is both the problem and the solution, and as an educator, Rousseau sought to make interventions accordingly. In this section, I discuss

Rousseau's critique of culture in more depth and his subsequent attempt to intervene in it by creating curated fictional worlds for his readers that provided ideal, private, and imagined experiences of socialization.

As Rousseau famously concluded in response to the Dijon Academy's question of whether the revival of the arts and sciences has contributed to improving morality that the modern state of art and culture has failed to contribute to moral progress and harmed it for two reasons. First, the arts misrepresent the truth in an entertaining way that prevents observers from true understanding. Echoing Plato's critique of poetry, Rousseau denounced "all the dramatic Authors as the corrupters of the People, or of whoever, allowing himself to be amused by their images, is not capable of considering them under their true aspect, nor of giving these fables the corrective they need."²³⁹ According to Rousseau, the arts do not convey truth and enhance understanding; they indulge audiences by showing them the image of knowledge that they already possess. Even the artist himself, Rousseau suggested, does not understand that which he depicts. Through the arts, people believe they are encountering reality, when in fact they are only receiving a false imitation of the truth. This is particularly a problem for children, who are ill-equipped to grasp meanings hidden beneath layers of fiction.

But Rousseau also deepened Plato's critique by linking the growing gap between nature and culture to moral failure and a lack of authenticity. Although many of his arguments in his 1758 *Letter to D'Alembert* rest on the monetary problems associated with having a theater, such as its effect on taxes, lost labor, and increased expenses,

²³⁹ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages and Writings Related to Music*, ed. John T. Scott (Dartmouth College Press, 2000), 337.

Rousseau's objections were fundamentally moral. Specifically, he accused the arts of promoting artifice, luxury, and a lack of virtue. The problem with culture and the arts is not merely that they can have a dangerous, persuasive effect on society or that they take people further from the truth of the things they represent, but that they take them further from themselves and away from virtue. That is, they encourage the corruption and proliferation of social selves divorced from their authentic, natural selves. Although civil man is inevitably divided between a social self and an authentic natural self, the arts exacerbate this problem.

As he wrote in his first discourse, "Before Art had molded our manners and taught our passions to speak an artificial language, our morals were rough-hewn but natural, and differences in behavior immediately announced differences in character."²⁴⁰ Rough, natural honesty and candor is no longer appreciated or valued, but the development of the arts increases artifice. Now, everything must be dressed up according to the dictates of fashion and high culture. The arts are primarily concerned with representation, and so they encourage a world of images and surfaces where appearance is valued over substance. As such, it no longer matters what is right or moral: "everything, being reduced to appearances, becomes mere art and mummery."²⁴¹ The arts corrupt the social world that the social self must inhabit by bringing both further and further from nature.

²⁴⁰ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 49.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

This critique is echoed and extended in *Emile*. There, he added that the arts invert the proper relation between usefulness and worth and further suggests that they exacerbate inequality by thriving on exclusivity: “Since the merit of these vain works [the arts] exists only in opinion, their very price constitutes a part of that merit, and they are esteemed in proportion to what they cost. The importance given to them does not come from their use but from the fact that the poor cannot afford them.” The art is not desired for its intrinsic merit, but because of the status the social self receives from its possession.²⁴²

The general preoccupation with artifice and luxury leads to a misjudgment of value and finally to corruption. Through the arts, people come to care more about fiction and appearances than truth and reality. They falsely believe that art can replace real experiences in the world. Moreover, audiences are provided with poor examples that incite their passions, dull their sense of civic duty, and fuel divisions within society. Children are particularly vulnerable to the negative role models they are exposed to in their encounters with the arts: reading “bad” novels is like being influenced by bad friends who are neither real nor desirable.

Even those characters who are not villains pose a threat. For example, in his essay “On Theatrical Imitation,” Rousseau described how theater presents characters who cannot command their own hearts. Encouraged to believe that “virtue is a sad thing,” the audience is constantly presented with heroes ruled by their passions.²⁴³ Through their

²⁴² See Gita May (2002) where she argues that in the First Discourse Rousseau ultimately suggests that the arts can enable and perpetuate inequality and oppression.

²⁴³ Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages and Writings Related to Music*, 347.

models, the arts encourage audiences to follow selfish inclinations and to become slaves to their passions.

Moreover, while the arts may appear to bring pleasure, they ultimately cause unhappiness, and Rousseau blamed much of his own unhappiness on the vast amount of fiction he read as a child. A voracious reader, the young Rousseau gained romanticized notions of life, love, and adventure. The books he read led him to be dissatisfied with who he was and where he was, and they filled his head with ideas of what could be. While the gap between where we are and where we think we could be—the insistence that life must be better wherever we are not—may be an important source of motivation and ambition for individuals, it's also, Rousseau pointed out, a driver of needs. We begin to think we need more than what we have, and yet are unlikely to be satisfied with any condition.

As he argued in his second preface to *Julie*, novels awaken needs in individuals that they would not otherwise have, driving them away from the provinces and toward the corruption of cities. They incite a taste for luxury that is blind to the superiority of natural simplicity:

By endlessly setting before their readers' eyes the pretended charms of an estate that is not their own, they seduce them, lead them to view their own with contempt, and trade it in their imagination for the one they are induced to love. Trying to be what we are not, we come to believe ourselves different from what we are, and that is the way to go mad.²⁴⁴

When the “needs” produced by novels exceed the reader's ability to meet them, there can only be unhappiness. Put differently, novels foster an awareness of one's station, and

²⁴⁴ Rousseau, *Julie, or the New Heloise*, 15.

when readers see the disparity between their own lives and the world of high culture being conveyed to them, they falsely believe they need more.

Finally, because artists are always primarily concerned with praise, art cannot be trusted as adequate guides to moral virtue. Artists not only fail to transmit higher truths; they are motivated by a desire to pander and please. Rousseau suggested that the fact that artists seek renown among their contemporaries will always lead to the creation of lower works that appeal to what is fashionable in the moment as opposed to what it is morally desirable and true.

And yet, despite his thorough and searing critique of the arts, Rousseau participated in their creation. Self-conscious of his apparent hypocrisy, he offered excuses. In his preface to *Narcissus*, he addressed the apparent contradiction between his words and his actions by writing that “it’s quite normal for people not to act in accordance with their sincere beliefs” and claiming that some of his material (including the play) was written early in life before his epiphany about the evils of the arts.²⁴⁵ And yet, a few years later, he still went on to publish the novel *Julie, or the New Heloise*, with the suggestion that he was merely conveying a true story told through actual letters.²⁴⁶

While it may be tempting to accept the discrepancy between Rousseau’s thoughts and actions as further evidence of his paradoxical nature, or to simply dismiss or

²⁴⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Preface to ‘Narcissus,’” in *Rousseau: “The Discourses” and Other Early Political Writings*, 12857th edition (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 94.

²⁴⁶ Notably, Rousseau was not unique in his harsh criticisms of the novel. As Ian Watt argues, novel was “widely regarded as a typical example of the debased kind of writing by which the booksellers pandered to the reading public” (*The Rise of the Novel*, 54).

overlook his more artistic endeavors altogether, I argue that *Julie* is not only—as I have already shown—critical to understanding Rousseau’s view of education, but also for understanding his approach to social and political reform. Through the relatively new form of the novel,²⁴⁷ Rousseau recreated society on his terms in order to effectively socialize his readers toward virtue. Not only does *Julie* illuminate ideas elaborated on in *Emile*, it reveals Rousseau to ultimately be more moderate, turning not to grand and public plans for social political reform, but to persuading individuals in private.

That is, Rousseau’s own engagement with novelistic writing proves his inability to dismiss it as only ever detrimental to society. Provided the right book, reader, and approach to reading, Rousseau concluded that novels might educate individuals toward ideals rather than against them, in part because the specifics of their genre make them closer to socialization. The distinctive power of the arts to influence our passions is one of the reasons why he believed them to be so dangerous, but that is also what makes them such effective means of persuasion: Art influences people beyond reason and resists rationality. As Rousseau discussed in his *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, music, poetry, and art can deeply affect people through their sentiments in a way that reason and language cannot.

²⁴⁷ For the classic account of the novel’s development as a genre, see Ian Watt’s book, *The Rise of the Novel*. Watt notes that the novel’s emphasis on individualism, originality, and realism all coincided with trends in philosophy, and both were manifestations of the social and political changes occurring at the time. His work identifies the novel as peculiarly English, focusing on Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding, but subsequent work (see, for example, Cohen and Dever, *The Literary Channel*) has challenged this characterization and argued that novel was the product of a transnational exchange.

In claiming that Rousseau used his novelistic and autobiographical works as a means of educating his readers, I align myself with scholars such as Nicole Fermon,²⁴⁸ Christopher Kelly,²⁴⁹ Joseph Reisert,²⁵⁰ John T. Scott,²⁵¹ Denise Schaeffer,²⁵² and John M. Warner.²⁵³ Rather than view these texts as utopic visions whose principal value lies in providing a critique of society through the comparison they offer with the real world, these scholars read them as active attempts to instruct the public. Fermon, for example, maintains that *Julie* is really “an intricate and subtle program of reform.”²⁵⁴ Kelly argues that Rousseau had a deep sense of authorial responsibility and strategically chose the novel genre. And like Kelly, Reisert interprets both *Emile* and *Julie* as role models to readers, while Schaeffer and Scott focus more exclusively on *Emile*. Whereas Schaeffer is particularly attentive to the role Sophie’s education plays in educating the reader

²⁴⁸ Nicole Fermon, *Domesticating Passions: Rousseau, Woman, and the Nation* (Wesleyan University Press, 1997).

²⁴⁹ Christopher Kelly, *Rousseau as Author: Consecrating One’s Life to the Truth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

²⁵⁰ Joseph Reisert, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: A Friend of Virtue* (Cornell University Press, 2018).

²⁵¹ John T. Scott, *Rousseau’s Reader: Strategies of Persuasion and Education* (University of Chicago Press, 2020). See also John T. Scott, “Do You See What I See? The Education of the Reader in Rousseau’s ‘Emile,’” *Review of Politics* 74, no. 3 (2012): 443–64. and John T. Scott, “The Illustrative Education of Rousseau’s *Emile*,” *The American Political Science Review* 108, no. 3 (2014): 533–46.

²⁵² Denise Schaeffer, *Rousseau on Education, Freedom, and Judgment* (Penn State University Press, 2014).

²⁵³ John M. Warner, *Rousseau and the Problem of Human Relations* (Penn State Press, 2016).

²⁵⁴ Fermon, *Domesticating Passions*, 21.

toward judgment, Scott focuses more on the structural and rhetorical elements of Rousseau's writings, as well as his use of frontispieces.

While these scholars are right to point to Rousseau's strategic use of fiction as means of educating readers, they tend to miss that Rousseau was not *merely* offering models for comparison, examination, persuasion, or inspiration. Rather, he was using the unique features of the novel genre to reconstruct an ideal social world that will privately socialize readers toward virtue instead of against it. Unlike other art forms, novels give readers direct access to the inner world of characters. These characters come to life in the minds of readers who are immersed in a reality designed by the author. In other words, books can transport readers into curated societies. Although they are fictional and cannot replace real experiences with the world, they can effectively "socialize" readers through their imagination using realistic depictions. Rousseau's turn to novels is a direct response to his critique of the corrupt society's inability to socialize its members toward virtue as well as an affirmation that culture is more powerful than instruction. Through the novel, Rousseau gave readers the friends he wishes he had, friends that he thinks will guide them back toward becoming more virtuous more effectively than the direct instruction of teacher could.

Given the extent to which Rousseau thought his readership had already been corrupted by novels,²⁵⁵ he saw only one way forward: using the source of corruption as

²⁵⁵ To be clear, Rousseau believed strongly in the particularity of a given people and place. His opposition to the establishment of a theater in the city of Geneva was predicated on a particular view of its character. Rousseau did believe that the arts may be necessary or even desirable in places where moral corruption already exists. That is, while a theater would be harmful and inappropriate for Geneva, in a different city, such

the cure. As Saint-Preux tells Julie in Letter XXI, “Novels are perhaps the ultimate kind of instruction remaining to be offered to a people so corrupt that any other is useless.”²⁵⁶ Rousseau sought to use their power for his own ends, a power Rousseau describes experiencing first-hand in his *Confessions*. For Rousseau, books provided an alternative society that was intimate and private in a way no other art is; literature fulfilled a void for him, a “need for an intimate society and as intimate as it could be.”²⁵⁷ He described reading as an activity he often did while eating, as though books equaled the company of friends: “For to read while eating has always been my whim for lack of a tête-à-tête. It is the compensation for the society I lack. I alternately devour a page and a bite: it is as if my book was dining with me.”²⁵⁸ Rousseau experienced books as a kind of society, and he recreated this effect in his work.

That Rousseau truly thought of himself as recreating a social world is apparent when he speaks in personal terms about how his disillusionment with society drove him to imagine a new one:

The impossibility of reaching real beings threw me into the country of chimeras, and seeing nothing existing that was worthy of my delirium, I nourished it in an ideal world which my creative imagination soon peopled with beings in accordance with my heart. Never did this resource come more opportunely and never was it found to be so fecund. In my continuous ecstasies I intoxicated myself with torrents of the most delightful feelings that have ever entered into the heart of a man. Completely forgetting the human race, I made for myself societies

as Paris, it might be a preferable alternative to the other vices which plague an already immoral society (*Letter to D’Alembert and Writings for the Theater*, 298).

²⁵⁶ Rousseau, *Julie, or the New Heloise*, 227.

²⁵⁷ Rousseau, *Confessions*, 348–49.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 225.

of perfect creatures as celestial by their virtues as by their beauties, reliable, tender, faithful friends such as I never found here below.²⁵⁹

Writing *Julie* offered Rousseau an alternative reality he could escape to, and he claims to have written it in spite of himself. While existing scholars write as though Rousseau always planned to write fiction strategically, he claimed that it was only afterwards that he realized, with painful self-awareness of his own apparent hypocrisy, that his fictions could be used instructively and productively by providing moral benefits to readers beyond himself.²⁶⁰

Rousseau's characters in *Julie* are "perfect" not because they had always been so, but because despite their faults and mistakes they never give up on loving and seeking virtue. This is what makes them effective and realistic "friends" to the reader: They are not so ideal that they seem beyond reach; they are realistic enough that readers can believe they could be imitated. Rousseau seeks to fulfill Saint-Preux's wish for authors who "would not be above human frailties, who would not from the very start display

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 359.

²⁶⁰ "After the severe principles I had just established with so much uproar, after the austere maxims I had so strongly preached, after so many mordant invectives against effeminate books that breathed love and softness, could anything more unexpected, more shocking be imagined, than to see myself suddenly inscribed by my own hand among the authors of those books I had censured so harshly? I felt this inconsistency with all its force, I reproached myself for it, I blushed about it, I was vexed about it: but all that was not enough to bring me back to reason. Being completely subjugated, I had to submit at all costs, and resolve to brave the 'what will people say'; aside from deliberating afterwards about whether I would resolve to show my work or not: for I did not yet assume that I would publish it. This decision being made, I throw myself into my reveries up to my neck, and as a result of turning and returning them in my head, I finally form the sort of plan whose execution has been seen. It was certainly the best use that could be made of my follies: love of the good, which has never left my heart, turned them to some useful objects which morality could take advantage of" (Rousseau, *Confessions*, 365).

virtue in Heaven beyond the reach of men, but induce us to love it by depicting it at first less austere, and then from the lap of vice know the art of leading men imperceptibly toward it.”²⁶¹ *Julie*’s characters are imperfect heroes intended to be accessible and realistic.

Whereas *Emile* is clearly described as an ideal construct,²⁶² *Julie*’s fictional status is purposely left ambiguous, and Rousseau toyed with his readers on the question of whether the novel’s letters were real or not in order to blur the line between fiction and reality as much as possible.²⁶³ While the artifice of the arts takes us further away from nature, and therefore further way from the truth, art which actively seeks to bring people towards nature and the truth can defy the norm. This is precisely what Rousseau saw himself doing and is one reason why he writes his autobiography, a work that attempts to prove that one can lay bare an authentic self and reveal his true nature through writing.

Ultimately, Rousseau hoped to immerse readers in an imaginary social world with realistically imperfect people who seek redemption. If Rousseau’s *Social Contract* and *Emile* are two instructive, theoretical models of two opposing poles—the socialized,

²⁶¹ Rousseau, *Julie, or the New Heloise*, 227.

²⁶² As I have already shown, *Emile* is an elaboration of a discussion of ideal education begun in *Julie*, and it can be read as a kind of sequel to the novel. Conceivably, the boy could be *Julie*’s son and the tutor could be St-Preux, charged with the boy’s education after his mother’s death. *Emile* is the story of an ideal child, with an ideal nature, and an ideal tutor; *Julie* can be read as the story of the tutor’s education: of how an imperfect teacher becomes virtuous through both romantic love for his virtuous—if flawed—student as well as friendship. Although by the end he is left heartbroken, Saint-Preux is ultimately educated in virtue, choosing to be good even in the face of challenges.

²⁶³ In *Julie*, he pretends to merely present facts, but he clearly identifies with the characters, describing in his autobiography how deeply he was moved while writing the letters in *Julie*, and how much he identified with Saint Preux.

virtuous citizen and the privately educated, virtuous man—his novel, *Julie or the New Heloise*, is Rousseau’s attempt to socialize and inspire readers to become more ideal when neither their natures nor the modern world they inhabit is ordered in the interest of their becoming ideal. Writing books that would persuade his readership toward virtue was not for Rousseau a question of mechanics and technique,²⁶⁴ but of the objects he chose to represent. Rousseau hoped that seeing the characters in *Julie* choose virtue in spite of their passions will move readers to do the same.

By making the private inner world of characters legible, novels could further model the authenticity and transparency Rousseau values. Although characters may be fictional, readers are privy to their raw and authentic selves as they reflect on and describe their actions and behaviors. Readers of *Julie* are invited to value the “true” selves of the characters—their inner thoughts, feelings, and inclinations. The characters are ideals he hopes readers will not only identify and sympathize with, but also be persuaded by and inspired to imitate.

Unlike the heroes of the books Rousseau criticized, his own characters do not neglect their duties to their country, their friends, and those in need, accusations he levels at the bourgeois.²⁶⁵ While readers may (and did) “give tears to [his] fictions,” perhaps

²⁶⁴ For Rousseau, the ability of the arts to affect our sentiments cannot be perfected or distilled into a science – the pleasure produced by a painting cannot be reduced to the “physics” of a painter’s art (Essay on the Origin of Languages and Writings Related to Music, 34). Similarly, music cannot be reduced to its sounds; its effects are linked to a deeper power. Melodies act as “signs of our affections, of our feelings; it is in this way that they excite in us the emotions they express and the image of which we recognize in them” (Ibid., 36).

²⁶⁵ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 66.

“thinking [they] have satisfied all the rights of humanity without having to give anything more of [themselves],”²⁶⁶ he ensured they would cry over characters who devote time to the suffering and the less fortunate. That is, his art sought to engage the natural sympathies of his readers in order to lead them to greater virtue and morality.

Julie does not incite a taste for luxury—just the opposite; it seeks to encourage a love of rural and natural simplicity. The novels contain no true villains for readers to live through vicariously. *Julie* has no “abominable monsters and atrocious actions” which only serve to “accustom the eyes of the people to horrors that they ought not even to know and to crimes they ought not to suppose possible.”²⁶⁷ While Julie and Saint-Preux are initially ruled by their hearts and their passions, they learn to command them with time. Although their passions are never and can never be fully eradicated, after their initial fall they seek redemption and resist their inclinations. Readers are not encouraged to believe that “virtue is a sad thing,”²⁶⁸ but that doing one’s duty over one’s inclinations is both honorable and admirable.

In offering this reading of *Julie*, I reject the nearly universal tendency of modern scholars, including influential interpreters such as Shklar and Starobinski, to interpret *Julie* as a predominantly sad and tragic novel. As a character, Julie is overwhelmingly

²⁶⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Letter to D’Alembert and Writings for the Theater* (Hanover: Dartmouth, 2004), 268.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 274.

²⁶⁸ See *Essay on the Origin of Languages and Writings Related to Music*, 347, where Rousseau argued that in arousing the passions, the arts cultivate citizens who are “sensitive and weak men who will do good or evil indifferently according as they are led by their inclination” instead of “be virtuous and just men, always subject to duty and to equity.”

read not as the inspirational figure she was intended to be, but as a tragic figure who must sacrifice her feelings and ultimately her life.²⁶⁹ Feminist readers of Rousseau such as Susan Moller Okin and Mira Morgenstern, for example, emphasize Julie's supposed unhappiness, as evidenced by her last confession that despite all the years that have passed, she still loves Saint-Preux and had never really stopped.²⁷⁰ Joel Schwartz deems Julie unhappy because she "no longer finds the ideal of an empire over her acquaintances to be an exciting or attractive one," and so, having been "too successful at sexual politics," dies willingly.²⁷¹ More recently, David Gauthier reads Julie's death as a negation of the happiness of Clarens and proof of the "failure of Wolmar's efforts to create an ideal community."²⁷²

What these interpretations fail to recognize is that *Julie's* ending is a happy one on Rousseau's terms. Wanting to see the triumph of youthful and passionate love, scholars fail to see how Rousseau rejected it while celebrating Julie as a model of virtue. Throughout the novel, Rousseau provided ample evidence that even if Julie had been able to marry Saint-Preux, their happiness would not have lasted. Their love, founded on desire and idealization, is an illusion that cannot last, and Julie knows this, which is why

²⁶⁹ Okin, "The Fate of Rousseau's Heroines," 103.

²⁷⁰ Mira Morganstern, "Women, Power, and the Politics of Everyday Life," in *Feminist Interpretations of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, ed. Lynda Lange (Penn State Press, 2002), 113–43; Okin, "The Fate of Rousseau's Heroines."

²⁷¹ Joel Schwartz, *The Sexual Politics of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (University of Chicago Press, 1985), 139–40.

²⁷² David Gauthier, *Rousseau: The Sentiment of Existence* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 105.

she laments the consummation that ensues. By contrast, her relationship with Wolmar is a much more stable love founded on respect and partnership. The fact that Julie's feelings for Saint-Preux never truly go away is not proof of the failure of her marriage to Wolmar, rather, it is proof of her virtue. The fact that Julie must sacrifice and struggle with her passions is precisely what makes her virtuous for Rousseau.

As Rousseau made abundantly clear throughout his works, without struggle, there can be no virtue, suggesting that all ideal, virtuous becoming will require some struggle. If Julie had simply gotten over Saint-Preux completely after marrying Wolmar, there would be nothing virtuous about her. In *Emile*, Rousseau repeatedly criticized the culture of adultery he observes in society; in writing *Julie*, Rousseau attempted to expose the hypocrisy of a culture that excoriates women for losing their virtue when they are single, only to turn a blind eye to adultery after marriage. His novel made Julie's "weakness" in youth understandable, and then highlights her faithfulness and virtuousness as a wife.

Far from tragic, Julie's death is a happy one on Rousseau's terms because she dies having redeemed herself and lived virtuously. Had she kept living, she might eventually have succumbed to the temptations of her environment, but her death ensures that readers can judge her life as a truly virtuous one. Moreover, although duty and virtue demand she and Saint-Preux remain apart on earth, Rousseau suggested that virtue will also bring them together in death when their love can take a purer form.

It is really in *Julie*, then, and not in *Emile*'s Sophie, that female readers are given someone to imitate. Rousseau wanted his readers to relate to her and emulate her; to admire her more than the enticing images of luxury and urban life. Through *Julie* and against dominant cultural trends, Rousseau sought to show that doing one's duty over

one's inclinations is both honorable and admirable and not "a sad thing."²⁷³ He portrayed a small community bound by love, friendship, and duty where immediate and extended family, friends, servants, and strangers all have their place and all live together in harmony with themselves and one another. At the center of it all is Julie, who, like Sophie, guides her lover to virtue by embodying it herself, acting as his compass when he risks being lost to the temptations of Paris. Despite being a "fallen woman," her actions do not change her inner good nature. Julie never stops loving virtue and ultimately enriches and instructs everyone around her as a daughter, friend, lover, wife, and mother, as well as a household manager and charitable contributor to the community.

Through *Julie*, Rousseau invited readers to become part of this community and to experience a kind of socialization through their imagination. This "social" experience is inward, private, and persuasive in a way that is both more subtle than argument and, unlike other arts, more removed from the influence and judgment of others. When viewing a play, for example, one is participating in a public display. The reaction of the crowd is palpable; one is aware of the effect the performance has on others and this factors into our own judgment of the work and its contents. In contrast, reading is more intimate, and when done alone it invites the reader to judge the material for herself away from the influence of others.

²⁷³ See *Essay on the Origin of Languages and Writings Related to Music*, 347, where Rousseau argues that in arousing the passions, the arts cultivate citizens who are "sensitive and weak men who will do good or evil indifferently according as they are led by their inclination" instead of "be virtuous and just men, always subject to duty and to equity."

In *Julie*, Rousseau made clear that he thinks books should be judged by the good they lead readers to do.²⁷⁴ At the same time, Rousseau he did not claim that books have one effect on all readers: the effect of any book will depend on how it is read and by whom, and while some readers are better off absorbing books at face value, others should adopt a more critical and philosophical approach. Relatively early on in Letter VII, Saint-Preux says as much when he discusses his plans for reading with Julie. He tells her they will read fewer, well-chosen texts to be discussed and reflected on at length, a method he claims is the best way to “digest” texts, as “it is always better to find on one’s own the things one would find in books.”²⁷⁵ Saint-Preux argues that he and Julie should be skeptical, not deferential in their reading in part because the knowledge they expect to learn from books is already within themselves.

But Saint-Preux does not recommend this approach for all students: “There are, I concede, many people for whom this method would be quite harmful and who need to read much and reflect little, because being wrong-headed, they garner nothing so bad as what they produce by themselves.”²⁷⁶ For some students, its best to simply absorb the work of others. But for students like Julie, the book is a mere starting point, and it is not the text itself, but the discussion spurred by the text that will lead to the greatest insights.

In other words, what the reader brings to the book ultimately decides its effect. This point is reiterated in the *Dialogues* when Rousseau argues with the Frenchman that

²⁷⁴ Rousseau, *Julie, or the New Heloise*, 214.

²⁷⁵ Rousseau, 46.

²⁷⁶ Rousseau, 47.

Jean-Jacques' books have always led him toward virtue. When the Frenchman protests, the character Rousseau counters, "Oh, I believe it! But that is not the fault of the books;" the reader must already bring "decency" and "impartiality" in order to profit from them.²⁷⁷ Those who read *Julie* correctly, then, will see flawed characters who find their way to virtue without wholly rejecting or hating who they were. They will not be corrupted by its depiction of passion but instead persuaded toward virtue and to the conclusion that redemption is always possible and desirable.

Inquiry and Solitude

In this chapter I have argued that while *Emile* reveals Rousseau's educational *theory*, *Julie* reveals Rousseau as an educator in *practice*, and that both are necessary to understanding his thought on education. Both are the reflections of a man who wondered: Perhaps if I had had the right teachers and read the right books, I too could have become virtuous and not merely good. Together they suggest that education is fundamentally a process of shaping—or at the very least persuading—through socialization. On the surface, then, it appears that Rousseau abandons education as truth-seeking inquiry altogether, favoring a vision of education as a means of self-becoming and not as the pursuit of truth. In this section, I reveal how Rousseau argued that truth-seeking inquiry was best pursued in solitude and exile.

²⁷⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues*, trans. Judith R. Bush, Christopher Kelly, and Roger D. Masters, Trans. from the French edition (Hanover: UPNE, 1990), 29.

Whereas Plato hoped that the academy could be an ideal space for the genuine pursuit of education in all of its forms, Rousseau was decidedly against educational institutions. He critiqued modern colleges as “huge establishments, in which young people are brought up at great expense to learn everything except their duties.”²⁷⁸ He criticized the time when “public schools of Philosophy were first opened,” claiming that by then “a degraded and decadent Greece had already forsaken its virtue and sold its freedom.”²⁷⁹ The self-taught Rousseau saw himself as a modern-day Socrates engaged in the exposure of the sophistry of intellectuals and their establishments.²⁸⁰

Rousseau’s apparent disdain for education as truth-seeking inquiry has been interpreted by many scholars as rooted in his concern for equality. Leo Strauss, for example, took his “praise of ignorance” to be “inspired by a republican or democratic impulse.”²⁸¹ Michael Locke McLendon links Rousseau’s distaste for intellectual elitism with a concern for the peasant and working classes it excludes.²⁸² Because focusing on

²⁷⁸ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 72.

²⁷⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Last Reply,” in *Rousseau: “The Discourses” and Other Early Political Writings*, 12857th edition (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 72.

²⁸⁰ Rousseau writes, “It cost Socrates his life to have said exactly the same things I am saying. In the trial against him one of his accusers brought charges on behalf of the Artists, another on behalf of the Orators, the third on behalf of the Poets, all of them on behalf of the supposed cause of the Gods. The Poets, the Artists, the Fanatics, the Rhetoricians triumphed; and Socrates perished. I am rather afraid that I did my century too much honor when I asserted that Socrates would not have had to drink the Hemlock now” (Last Reply by J-J Rousseau of Geneva, 64).

²⁸¹ Leo Strauss, “On the Intention of Rousseau,” *Social Research* 14, no. 4 (1947): 456–57.

²⁸² Michael Locke McLendon, “Rousseau, Amour Propre, and Intellectual Celebrity,” *The Journal of Politics* 71, no. 2 (2009): 506–19.

talent as the measure of merit emphasizes natural inequalities, society should instead be judged by a standard theoretically attainable by all, such as virtue and goodness.

But while there is some truth in this, Rousseau was actually less concerned with who philosophy excluded than with the culture it fostered among those who pursue it. He saw colleges and academies not as places of genuine learning and inquiry, but as “laughable” places of vain competition.²⁸³ Having initially been attracted to teaching and learning as a profession, he concludes that the activity is more about pride than wisdom:

I threw myself into my study willingly; and I gave it up even more wholeheartedly when I realized into what turmoil it threw my soul without any profit to my reason. I want nothing more to do with a deceitful profession in which one believes one is doing much for wisdom while doing everything for vanity.²⁸⁴

Once learning becomes a profession, the appearance of learnedness becomes more important than learning itself. Science and philosophy become commodities, and those who pursue them lose sight of their limits.

Rousseau’s critique is not unlike that of Plato’s with respect to the sophists, but whereas Plato worried more about the political consequences of education as truth-seeking inquiry, Rousseau argued that it must be carefully controlled, not only for the sake of the state but for the happiness, harmony, and morality of the individual. If pursued, it should be pursued mainly in private or even in solitude. So long as education

²⁸³ “I do not envision as public education those laughable establishments called colleges.” (*Emile*, 40-41). Rousseau clarifies in a footnote that he does know of some very good professors who would be able to teach well if they were not constrained by the institutions that housed them.

²⁸⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Observations [to Stanislas, King of Poland],” in *Rousseau: “The Discourses” and Other Early Political Writings*, (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 35.

for truth seeking is tied to status and vanity, it is unlikely to be pursued harmlessly and for its own sake. As such, it is best to stress education for becoming, even if this narrows the horizon of what education is and could be.

Despite his critiques, Rousseau clarified that he was not advocating for the total destruction of higher learning and resented being read as such. He wrote, “Let us beware of inferring from [this] that we should now burn all Libraries and destroy the Universities and the Academies. We would only plunge Europe back into Barbarism, and morals would gain nothing from it.”²⁸⁵ Again arguing that the problem may be part of the solution, he suggested that the arts and sciences can “in some measure temper the ferociousness of the men they have corrupted.”²⁸⁶ Science, art, and philosophy need not disappear, but the attitudes and values of those who pursue them must change.

When Rousseau stated, “I have said a hundred times over that it is good that there be Philosophers, provided the People do not pretend to be Philosophers,” the “people” he refers to are the learned classes and cultural elites of his day.²⁸⁷ Rousseau does not ultimately reject truth-seeking inquiry as such, but he objects to the idea that it should be widely pursued and embraced. He worries that giving truth seeking a special status in society will only replace it with the pursuit of status. As he replies to critics, “science in itself is very good, that is obvious.”²⁸⁸ Moreover, “the Author of all things is the fountain

²⁸⁵ Rousseau, “Observations [to Stanislas, King of Poland],” 51.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Rousseau, “Last Reply,” 69.

²⁸⁸ Rousseau, “Observations [to Stanislas, King of Poland],” 33.

of truth; to know everything is one of his divine attributes. To acquire knowledge and to extend one's enlightenment is, then, in a way to participate in the supreme intelligence."²⁸⁹ The true problem is not seeking truth for Rousseau, but the fact that not enough students are like Socrates, who humbly maintains his ignorance.²⁹⁰

For Rousseau, ignorance is a moderating force, one which helps limit curiosity "to the scope of the faculties one has received."²⁹¹ While man is "naturally curious" and "inspired with the desire to learn,"²⁹² this impulse is dangerous, leading at best to unhappiness and at worst to vanity, immorality, and corruption. In his *Confessions*, Rousseau described his own growing passion for learning as "a mania that stupefied me."²⁹³ Maintaining a sense of humility and ignorance is, he asserts, critical to controlling this impulse. The ignorance Rousseau values is:

a modest ignorance, born of a lively love of virtue, and which inspires nothing but indifference toward all that is unworthy of occupying man's heart, and does not contribute to making him better; a gentle and precious ignorance, the treasure of a soul pure and satisfied with itself, that finds all its felicity in retreating into itself, in confirming itself in its innocence, and has no need to seek a false and vain happiness in the opinion others might have of its enlightenment.²⁹⁴

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 33.

²⁹⁰ Rousseau wrote, "Only in a very few men of genius does insight into their own ignorance grow as they learn, and they are the only ones for whom study may be good: almost as soon as small minds have learned something, they believe they know everything, and there is no sort of foolishness which this conviction will not make them say or do." (Ibid., 38).

²⁹¹ Ibid., 49.

²⁹² Ibid., 38.

²⁹³ Rousseau, *The Confessions and Correspondence, Including the Letters to Malesherbes*, 203.

²⁹⁴ Rousseau, "Observations [to Stanislas, King of Poland]," 49.

Because Rousseau believed that the capacity for this kind of ignorance is rare, he cannot share Plato's hope in institutions like the academy specifically dedicated to the politically safe pursuit of education as inquiry.

Scholars who cannot take seriously Socrates' humility—or Rousseau's praise of it, for that matter—will fail to recognize this key aspect of their affinity.²⁹⁵ Rousseau's Socrates is genuinely interested in satisfying his own curiosity. He is not vain or disloyal to his city, and he is more interested in studying than in teaching. As Rousseau wrote, "My veneration for Socrates would greatly diminish if I believed that he had had the silly vanity of wishing to be the leader of a sect."²⁹⁶ Socrates did not need or want to establish a formal school because he did not study in order to teach or impress others.

Rousseau claimed to have this quality in common with Socrates, maintaining in his *Reveries* that he was not like those philosophers who "studied human nature to be able to speak knowingly about it, but not in order to know themselves."²⁹⁷ These philosophers "toiled in order to instruct others, but not in order to enlighten themselves within," and they "wanted to do a book, any book, provided it was well received."²⁹⁸ By contrast, Rousseau maintained that when he "desired to learn, it was in order to know and

²⁹⁵ Clifford Orwin, "Rousseau's Socratism," *The Journal of Politics* 60, no. 1 (1998): 174–87.

²⁹⁶ Rousseau, "Last Reply," 83.

²⁹⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker, Botanical Writings, and Letter to Franquières*, ed. Christopher Kelly, trans. Charles E. Butterworth, Alexandra Cook, and Terence E. Marshall, 1 edition (Hanover N.H.: UPNE, 2000), 18.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

not in order to teach.”²⁹⁹ He added that he could have easily pursued all of his studies in solitude.

In fact, for Rousseau, education as truth-seeking inquiry is and should be a solitary pursuit. As Christopher Kelly notes, whereas authorship is “an essentially public and political activity,” “the pursuit of truth” is “an essentially private and personal activity.”³⁰⁰ In *Emile* Rousseau wrote, “I see to it that he notices that the individuals who compose the academies are always worth more alone than as part of the group. He will draw for himself the implication about the utility of all these fine establishments.”³⁰¹ Education is best pursued in private, which is no longer possible in large cities because, “society there is so general and so mixed that there is no longer a refuge to which to retire, and a person is in public even in his own home.”³⁰² When pursued alone, learning is properly divorced from questions of status and vanity.

As Ronald Grimsley put it, Rousseau sought “to take men beyond the uncertainties of reflection, the vagaries of passion, and the ambiguities of language to the happiness of a fully personal experience enjoyed through the contemplation of the universal order.”³⁰³ For Rousseau, botany became the main activity by which he achieved this experience of contemplation.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 18.

³⁰⁰ Kelly, *Rousseau as Author*, 5.

³⁰¹ Rousseau, *Emile*, 1979, 344.

³⁰² Ibid., 388.

Critically, Rousseau's study of plants had nothing to do with medicine or utility, which he claimed would actively prevent him from achieving a state of contemplation. If he studied plants for their medicinal purposes, he would "never find those delights which arise from pure and disinterested contemplation."³⁰⁴ Rousseau described contemplation as a quasi-religious, out-of-body experience. When removed from utilitarian concerns, contemplation allowed his soul to "rise up and glide through nature" unmoored from the "bonds" of his physical self.³⁰⁵

For many scholars, Rousseau's retreat to reverie and botany appears to be a rejection of reason and philosophy. Roger Masters, for example, dismisses Rousseau's contemplation of plants as "an aimless or passive reaction to the objects which most immediately and pleasantly affect our senses," contrasting it with "philosophical knowledge about the whole and man's place in it."³⁰⁶ He takes this as evidence of Rousseau's rejection of reason as a natural ruling principle in man and proof that "freedom is as much or more fully achieved in the solitary dreamer's idleness as in the active quest of wisdom by rigorous philosophical study."³⁰⁷ But this opposition, I argue, is false. For Rousseau, his study of botany is everything the study of philosophy, or

³⁰³ Ronald Grimsley, "Rousseau and the Problem of Happiness," in *Hobbes and Rousseau: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Maurice William Cranston and Richard S. Peters (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1972), 444.

³⁰⁴ Rousseau, *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker, Botanical Writings, and Letter to Franquières*, 61.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

³⁰⁶ Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Jean Jacques Rousseau*, 104.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

education as truth-seeking inquiry more broadly, should be because it avoids aiming at one's becoming and seeks only truth:

But as soon as we mingle a motive of interest or vanity with it, either in order to obtain a position or to write books, as soon as we want to learn only in order to instruct, as soon as we look for flowers only in order to become an author or professor, all this sweet charm vanishes. We no longer see in plants anything but the instruments of our passions. We no longer find any genuine pleasure in their study. We no longer want to know, but to show what we know. And in the woods, we are only on the world's stage, preoccupied with making ourselves admired.³⁰⁸

This raises a question regarding how Rousseau would have wanted himself to be studied: Presumably not as a doctor who “diagnoses” modernity and offers various “solutions,” but as one who contemplated and engaged in the search for truth. But then we must consider to what extent Rousseau was didactic and to what extent he wrote himself.

Either way, Rousseau clearly wanted to preserve and not compromise education for truth seeking, and he certainly cautioned against affording too much power to education, concluding that great individuals are born, not made: “Only ordinary men need to be raised; their education ought to serve as an example only for that of their kind. The others raise themselves in spite of what one does.”³⁰⁹ For the solitary Rousseau at least, education is not an all-powerful tool for creating ideal selves and societies, and it is important to preserve some space for that education which does not aim at anything but truth.

³⁰⁸ Rousseau, *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker, Botanical Writings, and Letter to Franquières*, 64.

³⁰⁹ Rousseau, *Emile*, 2009, 52.

IV

Developing Liberal Democrats: Dewey's Synthesis

In this chapter, I reveal how the American progressive and pragmatist John Dewey (1859-1952) sought to harmonize the apparent tensions between Plato and Rousseau as well as between education for truth-seeking and becoming by generating a democratic theory of education still embraced by contemporary political theorists today. Following Hegel, Dewey maintained that educators need not choose between educating for the individual and educating for society because each could be perfected through the other. Analyzing his conception of education as growth, I show that although Dewey claimed to embrace an idea of education that has no end and is lifelong, he ultimately relied on a necessarily progressive view of education that places excessive, undue hope on the institution of the school. I note that in relegating all education to the service of society, Dewey owed more to Plato than is typically realized. Because he did not adequately recognize the value of individuals understood as separable from their contribution to social progress, he foreclosed the possibility of any education as a purely private or solitary activity.

Born in Burlington, Vermont, to a well-read but not highly educated father and a very pious mother determined to ensure her sons would be, like the men in her family, college-educated, Dewey went on to attend the University of Vermont in 1875.³¹⁰ It was not until relatively late in college that Dewey's attention was captivated by the curriculum in moral philosophy, and after graduation he taught high school before

³¹⁰ Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*.

deciding to apply to graduate school in philosophy at Johns Hopkins. He went on to embark on an illustrious academic career. Dewey was prolific, but he also managed to put his philosophical interest in education into practice through the founding of the University of Chicago Laboratory schools. He was a highly educated academic whose philosophy reflected a great faith in schooling.

Like Plato and Rousseau, Dewey believed in the educative power of association: He understood that cultivating citizenship is not primarily a question of inculcating the right knowledge or skills; rather, good citizens are formed through socialization and their interactions with others. But while Dewey found much inspiration in both Plato and Rousseau, he concluded that their theories offered a false choice. For Dewey, these figures were emblematic of a dualism that needed to be overcome: a supposed conflict between whether education ought to prioritize the individual or society. If Plato's public education took no account of the individual, Dewey thought, Rousseau's private education devalued society too much, encouraging an excessively private, independent, and domestic existence. Neither path was acceptable to Dewey, as neither would suit the liberal democracy he imagined for the United States. For Dewey, a third way was needed for a new kind of politics.

Dewey's answer to Plato and Rousseau was a vision of education that was both inspired by Darwinian theories of evolution and fiercely committed to liberal democracy. With its progressive emphasis on inquiry and experience, Dewey's education as "growth" was often associated with Rousseau, but as I will argue in this chapter, Dewey actually owed more to Plato than scholars have realized.³¹¹ Also influenced by Hegelian idealism,

Dewey insisted that a theory of education need not choose between prioritizing the individual or prioritizing society. For Dewey, individuals are wholly unique entities to be developed, but they are also part of one organism with limitless possibilities. As such, the purportedly inevitable tension Rousseau articulated between modern man and society was but one of many false dualisms to be dismissed, along with nature vs. society, thought vs. action, and the mind vs. the body.

As I will demonstrate, Dewey's denial of the many basic tensions Rousseau embraced was only possible through a redefinition of the concepts at stake. Although Dewey claimed to protect and value individualism while serving society, his theory hinged on a particular understanding of what it means to be an individual, one that refused the possibility and desirability of solitude. That is, Dewey's conception of selfhood left no room for education as a truly private activity. He could only maintain that there was no need to choose between forming men and forming citizens because he insisted the individual and society only exist in and through one another. According to Dewey's democratic education, to educate an individual is to educate a necessarily *social* individual who contributes to society through her individuality.

For Dewey as for Plato, education must be tamed to serve society. But whereas the Kallipolis suggested that an education for society meant total surrender to it, Dewey

³¹¹ Irving Babbitt and E.D. Hirsch Jr. famously critiqued Dewey as a progressive and romantic Rousseauian (Smilie, "Bookends of the Twentieth Century."). While many scholars have come to note Dewey's disagreement with Rousseauian, child-centered progressives, most continue to stress Dewey's distance from Plato, if they note his relationship to him at all (See West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy.*; Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy.*; Ryan, Dewey, and Child, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism.*; Fott, "John Dewey and the Mutual Influence of Democracy and Education."; Garrison, *Dewey and Eros.* Noddings, "Dewey's Philosophy of Education: A Critique from the Perspective of Care Theory.")

thought that an education *for* society would not have to mean subordination *to* society. This could be accomplished by making individuals partners in the activity of their education and by refusing to accept the status quo as final. Rather than train children to fit into narrow, predetermined roles, one could provide a general education flexible enough to accommodate an economy subject to rapid change. By taking a democratic approach, society could educate children to choose for themselves how they would like to serve society rather than dictate and justify their place in a fixed hierarchy.

In order to achieve his vision, Dewey turned not to law, as Plato did, nor to the home, as Rousseau did, but to the school. Deeply critical of conventional schooling, Dewey sought to reimagine the school as a special environment that would mediate between both realms. In his ideal, the school would be more than a crucial intermediary between public and private life. Beyond offering a gradual introduction to the complexities of existing society, it would also determine what society should conserve, harmonize its disparate elements, and be the key to its advancement. Dewey's schools would operate according to his expansive understanding of education, serving as mini-societies that would educate both children and adults. They would offer a more controlled setting for socialization and do their most important teaching through association rather than inculcation.

Dewey's theory of education placed enormous pressure on the school, insisting that it could and should be all things to all people. As such, his philosophy—still attractive today—is ultimately premised on an undue faith in the ability of schools to design and control ideal subjects who will shape the future; to perfect becoming. For Dewey, truth-seeking and becoming were intimately connected, and the value of the

individual was inseparable from his or her contribution to social progress. As such, he foreclosed the possibility of education as a purely private or solitary truth-seeking activity.

Rousseau vs. Plato

Political theorists are largely interested in Dewey as a pragmatist and precursor to deliberative and participatory theories of democracy. Richard Rorty led an initial resurgence of interest in Dewey's democratic theory and pragmatism, and subsequent studies have explored his views on ethics, liberalism, religion, art, and more.³¹² Typically, Dewey is read and invoked as a thinker of his moment whose work remains relevant to the challenges of modern American democracy today. His work has been especially inspirational and relevant to political theorists of education such as Amy Gutmann, Martha Nussbaum, and Danielle Allen, all of whom view schools as essential to the health of democracy.³¹³

Dewey's investment in the history of political thought on education may therefore come as a surprise to those who know him as a progressive and pragmatist thinker primarily focused on the pressing issues of his day. But while Dewey was obviously concerned with addressing his contemporaries and immediate political concerns, he also

³¹² Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*; Ryan, Dewey, and Child, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*; Honneth and Farrell, "Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation."; Caspary, *Dewey on Democracy*; Rogers, "The Undiscovered Dewey."; Mattern, "John Dewey, Art and Public Life."

³¹³ Gutmann, *Democratic Education*; Nussbaum, *Not For Profit*; Allen, *Education and Equality*.

viewed himself as part of a larger tradition that merited study and critique. As I will show, Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916) is as much an intervention in debates between "child-centered progressives," "social efficiency progressives," and "liberal arts humanists,"³¹⁴ as it is a conversation with Plato, Rousseau, and their legacy. Dewey understood there to be a direct link between ideas and history, and he often employed history and philosophy as a way of explaining how the present had come to be.

For Dewey, the past must not only be studied for its potential present use, but also to escape its dominating influence. Studying philosophy, he wrote, is "the only way to avoid being imposed upon" by the philosophers who have come before us:

[The philosopher's ideas] become embodied in the educational systems and methods, in the theological codes and dogmas, in the legal attitude and practice, in the turns and terms of language. In dying as philosophy, the ideas come to live as a part of the common and unconscious intellectual life of men in general. They become the presupposed background, the unexpressed premises, the working (and therefore controlling) tools of thought and action. Filtered to us through the media of education, law, language, religion and science itself they take possession of us. Unless we are to be mastered by them, we must master them. And this involves a continual dragging of them out of their unconscious hiding places; a deliberate and reflective overhauling of them—that is to say, the study of philosophy.³¹⁵

In advancing his own theory, it was therefore imperative to Dewey that he also provide an account of the evolution of political thought on education that would expose and critique the ways in which past thinkers had led his contemporaries astray.

³¹⁴For an account of Dewey and his contemporaries on educational questions see Mintz, "What is the Purpose of Education?" in *John Dewey's Democracy and Education: A Centennial Handbook*. For more on Dewey's philosophical influences and contemporaries see Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* and Ryan, Dewey, and Child, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*.

³¹⁵ Dewey, "Why Study Political Philosophy?" 62–63.

In “Schools of Tomorrow” (1915) Dewey applauded Rousseau for advancing the idea that students must be studied and that educators must be attentive to the natural abilities of children. He argued that this “sounded the key-note of all modern efforts for educational progress,” and reconceived of education as “the growth of capacities with which human beings are endowed at birth” rather than as an external imposition.³¹⁶ Dewey further praised Rousseau’s insistence on allowing a child’s growth and development to proceed slowly,³¹⁷ as well as his attention to the development of the body as an end in itself.

But while Dewey agreed with many aspects of Rousseau’s thought, he also rejected much of his philosophy. Deeming Emile an “exemplary prig,” Dewey was critical of both the outcome of Rousseau’s private education and its foundations.³¹⁸ Specifically, Dewey thought Rousseau’s penchant for dualistic thinking led him to wrongly abandon his true preference of using education to create citizens. For Dewey, Rousseau’s opposition of natural man to the social citizen was premised on a fundamental misunderstanding of nature, man, and education. Each of these, Dewey insisted, is fundamentally social, and so to seek to aim education at the preservation of a natural self apart from society is inevitably a contradiction in terms.

For Dewey, the spirit of education is inherently social. Education is precisely that which enables social life to survive and continue; it is that which enables society’s

³¹⁶ Dewey, “Schools of To-Morrow,” 211.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 214.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 248.

continuous becoming. As he explains in *Democracy and Education*, education exists because the survival of humanity necessitates that it must: If humans were immortal, there would be no need for one generation to educate the next. But birth and death are inescapable facts, and so education “in its broadest sense” must exist to allow for the “social continuity of life.”³¹⁹ Society depends on education in part because it allows the past, present, and future to communicate.

Therefore, to aim education at the preservation of a child’s supposedly inner, natural, and independent goodness, as Rousseau would have it, is to work against the basic function of education. This is not simply because, as Nel Noddings has noted, Dewey was not as child-centered as he is typically thought to be, but because for Dewey the “inner” is “simply that which does not connect with others—which is not capable of free and full communication.”³²⁰ Moreover, the desire to “perfect an ‘inner’ personality” is a symptom of undesirable social division.³²¹ According to Dewey, the tendency to locate the self in that which is purely inner and separate from others was a relatively recent and misguided development in Western history.³²² Before the influence of Protestantism, he argued, the individual was understood as a conduit for a larger force, as “a channel through which a universal and divine intelligence operated.”³²³ It is this notion

³¹⁹ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 6.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

³²² *Ibid.*, 152.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 152.

of the self that Dewey wished to recover and adapt into a new idea of democratic education. He insisted that “what one is as a person is what one is as associated with others, in a free give and take of intercourse.”³²⁴ Contra Rousseau, the self is social, and the social is natural.³²⁵

For Dewey, Rousseau’s vision of natural education was both wrongheaded and impossible because it denied the naturalness of the social self. Rousseau’s natural education might claim to cultivate a “natural” individual apart from society, but what it really did, Dewey insisted, was to substitute a larger human society in place of a bounded, political one. That is, Rousseau’s natural education does not escape society and could never do so. Rather, it is ultimately cosmopolitan, calling to humanity over citizenship. When Rousseau promises to free men from society by bringing them independence from it, he merely widens the net of society to encompass all of humanity. On Dewey’s reading, Rousseau did not really posit the education of an individual for himself and apart from society, but rather for and toward the broadest society of all: Humanity.³²⁶

³²⁴ Ibid., 67.

³²⁵ For Dewey’s new and critical understanding of individualism, see Kadlec, *Dewey’s Critical Pragmatism*.

³²⁶ Dewey describes how in practice, Rousseau’s idea of natural education ultimately worked against the liberation of the individual. In the German tradition, he writes, “The ‘state’ was substituted for humanity,” and “cosmopolitanism gave way to nationalism” as “education became a civic function and the civic function was identified with the realization of the ideal of the national state.” In seeking to realize this social aim, education came to be associated with subordination and discipline even as an idea of “culture as complete development of personality” persisted (Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 53).

Dewey's problem with Rousseau's private education was therefore actually more complicated than it may seem at first glance. It was not simply that Rousseau was too focused on the individual, but that his model also aimed too broadly at humanity, making effective societal organization toward the achievement of concrete goals difficult. Neither nature nor humanity, Dewey reasoned, could offer a clear agent to direct and administer education. While Dewey granted that nature provides "the initiating and limiting forces in all education," he rejected that nature also provides the "ends or aims" of education as Rousseau and the Romantics thought.³²⁷ It's not "spontaneous development" that children need, but "an environment which shall organize them."³²⁸ And, while Dewey accepted that "evil institutions and customs work almost automatically to give a wrong education which the most careful schooling cannot offset," he maintained that the answer is not to try to educate the individual away from society, but to "provide an environment in which native powers will be put to better uses."³²⁹ That is—toward concrete *social* ends.

Dewey's critique—perhaps more appropriately aimed at Rousseau's followers than Rousseau himself—neglects the fact that Rousseau did in fact provide an administrative agent for his education and also sought to provide a curated environment: the family and the home. He even offered a second choice of administrator—a tutor devoted to the child. The state is not the necessary administrator of Rousseau's natural education, and it never could be for the same reason that his theory resists

³²⁷ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 63.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

institutionalization: Rousseau's model of private education is not scalable, as the "same man can only give one education."³³⁰ Properly understood, Rousseau's natural, individual education is so individuated that it simply cannot be administered en masse by a state or even a school. On Rousseau's account, only a child's parents or an ideal, devoted tutor could provide the kind of individual attention and care required by his education.

Whereas Rousseau urged parents and tutors to embrace rural life and curate an ideal, private environment at home, Dewey sought to reform public schools into ideal social environments. Dewey fundamentally objected to the private education Rousseau advocated because it was at odds with social action, coordination, and, in Dewey's view, true self-realization. Dewey rejected the premise and the critique that an education aimed at what he termed "social efficiency" is essentially about the "subordination of natural powers to social rules" and that the required correction is an education aimed at nature.³³¹ To hold Rousseau's view is to accept a false conception of the self as separable from society and to demand a false choice between the man "sacrificing himself to doing useful things for others, or sacrificing them to the pursuit of his own exclusive ends, whether the saving of his own soul or the building of an inner spiritual life and personality."³³² The task of democratic education, Dewey insisted, is to reject this dichotomy.

³³⁰ Rousseau, *Emile*, 51.

³³¹ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 65.

³³² *Ibid.*, 67.

For Dewey, any understanding of education which allows individuals to become separate or, as he puts it, “isolated” should be avoided at all costs. The strong society is one in which everyone is interdependent, and Dewey worried in pieces like “Education from a Social Perspective” (1913) and “American Education Past and Future” (1931) that American society had become too focused on valuing self-reliance and self-sufficiency. At first, he argued, education in America was understood to be “a patriotic necessity” and “the salvation of the republic” because it would ensure enlightened citizens.³³³ Then, as attention shifted to the frontier, “there was much talk about self-help and success, and very little about public or social duties.”³³⁴ Education became a tool for enterprising individuals to achieve wealth and status.

It was not merely a shift toward emphasizing education’s economic utility over its political utility that bothered Dewey, but the glorification of independence that underwrote this shift. As he asserted it in *Democracy and Education*, to venerate the self-made man is to “decrease the social capacity of an individual,” to invite “aloofness and indifference,” and to render the individual “so insensitive to his relations to others as to develop an illusion of being really able to stand and act alone.”³³⁵ Dewey went so far as to call this kind of thinking a “form of insanity which is responsible for a large part of the remediable suffering of the world.”³³⁶ While he maintained that the cultivation of

³³³ Dewey and Ross, “Education from a Social Perspective,” 114.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 115.

³³⁵ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 28.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

individuality was important, Dewey insisted that this must be done with the understanding that the individual is a fundamentally social and interdependent being with a duty to society.

Dewey urged that especially with the closing of the frontier, a new understanding of education in America was needed; one that “would be democratic in the social sense of the word” and therefore “neither nationalistic nor individualistic.”³³⁷ This new approach would center cooperation with others rather than encourage a code of every man for himself. It would be fundamentally social, even as it preserved individualism “in respect to methods of thought and judgment.”³³⁸ At the same time, it would not devolve into nationalism. That is, Dewey wanted an education system that would value individual thought while ultimately prioritizing social ends and needs.

Dewey believed that Rousseau, the Romantics, and the self-made ethos of the American frontier culture had strayed too far from the proper relationship between politics and education. Like Plato—whom he once cited as his “favorite philosophic reading”³³⁹—Dewey fully accepted that education should be made to serve socio-political ends. He applauded Plato for recognizing education as the foundational and organizing principle of politics and for revealing education to be the means by which persons are shaped to assume their role in society.

Dewey even agreed with Plato’s basic approach to education in *The Republic* in so far as it used education to sort children in order to help them find their place in the

³³⁷ Dewey and Ross, “Education from a Social Perspective,” 115.

³³⁸ Dewey and Ratner, “American Education Past and Future,” 97.

³³⁹ Dewey and Kurtz, “From Absolutism to Experimentalism,” 154.

polis. In *Democracy and Education* he wrote that “society is stably organized when each individual is doing that for which he has aptitude by nature in such a way as to be useful to others.”³⁴⁰ It is not only best for society when each individual is serving others in the best way her talent allows, it is also best for the individual because to “find out what one is fitted to do and to secure an opportunity to do it is the key to happiness.”³⁴¹ Since the ideal contribution is based on talents not determined by one’s family or wealth, it is “the business of education to discover these aptitudes and progressively to train them for social use.”³⁴² What Dewey described is like a vocation, an idea Joel Winkelman has recently used to frame Dewey’s democratic theory and understanding of the role of education.³⁴³ Winkelman does not make any mention of Plato, but Dewey openly credited him with this insight, adding that Plato “laid down the fundamental principle of a philosophy of education when he asserted that it was the business of education to discover what each person is good for, and to train him to mastery of that mode of excellence, because such development would also secure the fulfillment of social needs in the most harmonious way.”³⁴⁴

For Dewey, Plato’s mistake was not “in qualitative principle, but in his limited conception of the scope of vocations socially needed; a limitation of vision which reacted

³⁴⁰ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 50.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁴³ Winkelman, “John Dewey’s Theory of Vocation.”

³⁴⁴ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 161.

to obscure his perception of the infinite variety of capacities found in different individuals.”³⁴⁵ That is, Plato erred not in his basic idea, but in failing to realize that the number social functions and range of individual capacities are far greater than he imagined. He was too illiberal, grouping individuals into three broad classes according to their proven natures and capacities. Where Plato saw only producers, guardians, and philosopher-kings, Dewey saw each individual as a class unto himself who could constantly grow and contribute his unique talents.³⁴⁶ As historian Robert B. Westbrook noted, “for Dewey, the relationship between individual capacities and environments was one of *mutual* adjustment, not a matter of the one-sided accommodation of individual needs and powers to a fixed environment.”³⁴⁷ Instead of being trained to specialize in a predetermined function, the child must be treated as “an organic whole, intellectually, socially, and morally, as well as physically.”³⁴⁸ Each child must be taken on her own terms and never viewed as fixed.

Dewey thought that if every individual is appreciated as a growing, unique, and valuable contributor to society, the anti-democratic and hierarchical elements in Plato’s *Republic* could be avoided. Unlike Rousseau, who pointed to comparison and

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 161.

³⁴⁶ Cornell West makes an important distinction between “functionalistic” and “functional” education, noting that “Dewey’s functionalistic education, a critical education for democratizing society, could easily be mistaken for a functional education, a fitting education that simply adjusts one to the labor market possibilities.” West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, 84.

³⁴⁷ Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, 43.

³⁴⁸ Dewey, “Ethical Principles Underlying Education,” 58.

competition as inevitable features of society, Dewey suggested that these ideas are taught by adults to children who would not otherwise form such ideas of better and worse on their own. Schools exacerbate the problem when they use tests to not only rank students as individuals but also to class them by ability, encouraging a fixed hierarchy where one group is viewed as inherently smarter, better, and more valuable than the other. Dewey believed that by rooting out the adult desire to class and compare children and by encouraging a true valuation of individuality, one could realize a democratic version of Plato's vision that celebrated all individuals.

Put another way, for Dewey, Plato's model of education in the *Republic* was basically correct; its key mistake was in its failure to properly value and conceive of the individual. The rejection of the individual as a fundamental and agential unit of society led Plato to unacceptably subordinate the individual to a hierarchical, class-based system. What Plato's *Republic* needed was democratic liberalism, as Dewey understood it. By making individuals partners in the activity of their education, by refusing to accept "economic conditions and standards" as final, and by taking a democratic approach, one could embrace education for society without being subordinated by society to fulfil a predetermined role. Rather than use education to decide for the child what she should become, Dewey thought education could be used to "develop capacity to the point of competency to choose" one's role and career.³⁴⁹ Instead of training children to fit into narrow, preset roles, society could provide a general education flexible enough to accommodate a society and an economy subject to rapid change.

³⁴⁹ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 65.

If Plato's *Republic* described a *planned*, pre-arranged society aimed at stability and composed of fixed groups, Dewey envisioned a *planning*, ever-changing society aimed at growth and composed of unique individuals. For Dewey, the distinction between a "planned" society and a "planning" society separated the autocratic from the democratic.³⁵⁰ It is only when ends—be they political or economic—are viewed as fixed and predetermined that the individual is lost. This is because one's unique capacities are of no consequence to a system that has already decided in advance what it needs from individuals. As Dewey affirmed much later in *Individualism Old and New* (1930), he was deeply opposed to any arrangement which would use education as a means of providing "efficient industrial fodder and citizenship fodder in a state controlled by pecuniary industry."³⁵¹ Not only does this eliminate individual agency in his view, it works against progress and results in stagnation.

Notably, Dewey did not think of Plato as being intentionally stagnant or opposed to progress. Quite the opposite: He read progressive, experimentalist, and even pragmatist elements into Plato. Dewey's Plato was a political one, and he criticized his contemporaries for casting Plato as systematic and unconcerned with the real world. In "From Absolutism to Experimentalism" (1930), he wrote:

Nothing could be more helpful to present philosophizing than a 'Back to Plato' movement; but it would have to be back to the dramatic, restless, cooperatively inquiring Plato of the *Dialogues*, trying one mode of attack after another to see what it might yield; back to the Plato whose highest flight of metaphysics always terminated with a social and practical turn, and not to the artificial Plato

³⁵⁰ Dewey and Childs, "The Social-Economic Situation and Education," 76.

³⁵¹ Dewey, *Individualism Old and New*, 102.

constructed by unimaginative commentators who treat him as the original university professor.”³⁵²

For Dewey, the ancient skeptic interpretation of Plato was closer to the “true” Plato, even if it also overstated certain aspects of his thought. According to Dewey, Plato always turned back to the political and the pragmatic; he sought to experiment with ideas and did not adhere to a complete and rigid system.

On Dewey’s reading, Plato was not a conservative, but a misguided progressive who had wrongly assumed that “reason” and “experience” were fundamentally at odds and that only one offered a path to progress. According to Dewey in *Democracy and Education*, because for Plato experience meant “custom and tradition,” only reason could provide a new standard that would bring “unity, order, and law.”³⁵³ If experience was “habituation, or the conservation of the net product of a lot of past chance trials,” reason was “the principle of reform, of progress, of increase of control.”³⁵⁴ Reason allowed one to break free from convention. It offered the way to a new and better future unrestrained by the dictates of the past. The society ruled by reason would be rigid, disciplined, and planned, but it would also be, in Plato’s view, progressive.

Dewey notes that as with other dualisms, Western thinking on this dualism of reason and experience then reversed: later “reason, universal principles, prior notions, meant either blank forms which had to be filled in by experience, by sense observations, in order to gain significance and validity; or else were inundated prejudices, dogmas

³⁵² Dewey and Kurtz, “From Absolutism to Experimentalism,” 155.

³⁵³ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 138.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.

imposed by authority, which masquerade and found protection under august names.”³⁵⁵

Experience, not reason, came to be valued as the source of meaning and the force of progress. Reason was viewed as a restrictive and conservative force used to maintain the status quo. For Dewey, the proper next step was to soundly reject the supposed division between reason and experience and to realize that neither is inherently conservative nor progressive. As a living, evolving organism, society needed both reason and experience to grow.

A Hegelian Synthesis

A persistent theme in Dewey’s work is the Hegelian-inspired conviction that overcoming dualisms is the key to all progress. Although, as I have demonstrated, Dewey clearly had more sophisticated readings of Plato and Rousseau, he often presented a more simplistic picture of them. Casting them as representatives of competing and apparently incompatible traditions suited his argument: Whereas the Platonic model of education privileged society too much, the Rousseauian one privileged the individual too much, and so what was needed was a new, democratic and Deweyian conception of education. As he suggested in *Democracy and Education*, the divide between Plato and Rousseau was reflected in contemporary debates by those who called for “social efficiency” in education on the one hand and those who argued for “personal culture” on the other. What both sides failed to realize, Dewey insisted, was that the assumed tradeoff to be

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 140.

made between privileging society or privileging the individual was a false one, and this was especially true in the context of a democracy.

Dewey's insistence on the unity of society and the individual was rooted in his Hegelianism, an influence he first encountered in graduate school. Dewey described his encounter with Hegel as a "liberation" from the "sense of divisions and separations" that the "heritage of a New England culture" had given him.³⁵⁶ In recounting his intellectual history, Dewey wrote:

[Hegel's] synthesis of subject and object, matter and spirit, the divine and the human, was, however, no mere intellectual formula; it operated as an immense release, a liberation. Hegel's treatment of human culture, of institutions and the arts, involved the same dissolution of hard-and-fast dividing walls, and had a special attraction for me.³⁵⁷

Although he described a gradual distancing from Hegel and German idealism in the fifteen years following, he also admitted that Hegel "left a permanent deposit in [his] thinking."³⁵⁸ I argue that this is particularly evident not only in Dewey's constant calls for unity and his critiques of dualistic thought, but in his basic understanding of education and its relationship to politics.

Scholars have long puzzled over the extent of Dewey's Hegelianism. As John Shook and James A. Good detail, Morton White's 1943 "The Origins of Dewey's Instrumentalism" led many to accept a distinct division in Dewey's thought, with a total transition away from Hegel and toward pragmatism occurring sometime between 1894

³⁵⁶ Dewey and Kurtz, "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," 153.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

and 1903.³⁵⁹ Focusing on his later works and finding Hegel therein, both Good and Shook argue that Dewey demonstrates a “gradual and naturalistic modification of his Hegelianism” rather than a sharp break.³⁶⁰ A consensus has not been reached: Melvin Rogers, for example, continues to emphasize Dewey’s break from Hegel.³⁶¹ Arguing for sharper divisions and contextualized readings of Dewey’s work, Raymond D. Boisvert identifies idealism, experimentalism, and naturalism as three distinct stages in Dewey’s intellectual development.³⁶² Conversely, Richard M. Gale has gone as far as to suggest that Dewey was “formulating a mystical doctrine,” and that when he moved from “absolute idealism to what he called alternatively pragmatism, instrumentalism, or experimentalism,” he was merely “pouring old wine into new bottles” by replacing ‘experience’ with ‘universal consciousness’ in his work.³⁶³ Although Eric MacGilvray,³⁶⁴ Blake Emerson,³⁶⁵ and Rahel Jaeggi³⁶⁶ have all offered readings of the different ways in

³⁵⁹ Shook and Good, *American Philosophy*.

³⁶⁰ Shook and Good, vii. See also Good, *A Search for Unity in Diversity* and Good, “John Dewey’s ‘Permanent Hegelian Deposit’ and the Exigencies of War.”

³⁶¹ Rogers, “The Undiscovered Dewey.”

³⁶² Boisvert, *Dewey’s Metaphysics*.

³⁶³ Gale, “The Naturalism of John Dewey,” 60–62.

³⁶⁴ MacGilvray, *Reconstructing Public Reason*.

³⁶⁵ Emerson, “The Democratic Reconstruction of the Hegelian State in American Progressive Political Thought.”

³⁶⁶ Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*.

which Dewey remained influenced by Hegel, the similarities and differences the two thinkers shared on questions of political education have been largely overlooked.³⁶⁷

Dewey shared with Hegel the assumption that the ultimate ends of education and individual development are social. As German philosopher Karl Löwith wrote, Hegel “thought it obvious that ‘humanistic’ education was just what educated the individual for his life in the polis.”³⁶⁸ He regarded society as a positive contributor to human development and rejected theories of education that insisted otherwise. Like Dewey, Hegel criticized Rousseau’s idealization of the state of nature against the corruption of society. Society is not the source of corruption but that which allows the self to be realized and which gives it meaning. Moreover, in his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel is clear that even if education and culture were rightly understood as unnatural and corrupt, an education away from society was impossible. Hegel criticized as “futile” those “pedagogical experiments” which sought to educate by “removing people from the ordinary life of the present and bringing them up in the country (cf. Rousseau's *Emile*).”³⁶⁹ For Hegel and for Dewey, it is simply impossible to escape society, and education should not only accept this fact, but celebrate it.

Dewey took from Hegel and German idealism more broadly a notion of education, or *Bildung*, as “the absolute transition to the infinitely subjective substantiality

³⁶⁷ An exception, David Fott has argued that Dewey did in fact break decisively with Hegel precisely because of his vision of education as *Bildung* and its idea of education as the unfolding of potentiality. Fott, “John Dewey and the Mutual Influence of Democracy and Education.”

³⁶⁸ Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, 289.

³⁶⁹ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 196.

of ethical life, which is no longer immediate and natural, but spiritual and at the same time raised to the shape of universality.”³⁷⁰ Beyond mere training or the transmission of knowledge, education as *Bildung* is the process of harmonizing the particular and the universal. For Dewey as for Hegel, “in its absolute determination,” education is “liberation and work towards a higher liberation.”³⁷¹ Not restricted to an individual, *Bildung* could apply to an entire people or culture, and it would always involve a process of shaping, formation, and development.

Hegel’s understanding of *Bildung* had two key components that Dewey took to be fundamental to his own vision of education. First, it was an ongoing, lifelong process. While education would begin with childhood and the family, it did not end with adulthood. Civil society would continue to foster and enable *Bildung* in the ultimate interest of freedom by instructing its members in universality and interdependence through the system of needs. This was achieved through rational social institutions, and the school had a special mediating role to play between the family and society. As Hegel put it in his 1811 address at Nuremburg, the school is one of the most important modern institutions, an institution that is crucial to the cultivation of *Bildung* because it teaches children to become self-forming individuals that are independent of their families.³⁷² While the process toward socialization and *Bildung* begins with the ethical upbringing

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 225.

³⁷¹ Ibid., 225.

³⁷² Pinkard, *Hegel*, 305.

provided by parents and continues afterward through civil society, it is schools that help youths make this shift.

Second, *Bildung* was not simply a matter of training and instruction. As Terry Pinkard emphasizes, *Bildung* demands “self-activity, self-development, and self-direction,” even as it requires an educator. In other words, *Bildung* requires the student to take an active role. Unlike the German *Erziehung*, which Raymond Geuss describes as a kind of education that may be acquired more passively, *Bildung* describes both the process of learning and an attribute possessed by those that have worked to attain self-cultivation.³⁷³ That is, *Bildung* is both an activity and the result of that activity. It is a quality that one may achieve and possess. One is not endowed with *Bildung* simply by virtue of being born into a particular class; *Bildung* is instead the result of a process of self-cultivation that can be achieved by individuals regardless of their family origin.

But while in theory *Bildung* was available to all individuals, in practice Hegel took for granted that not everyone would be capable of achieving it at the highest level. Here, some of the cracks between Dewey and Hegel do become apparent. Dewey rejected *Bildung* as a potential some had and others did not. For Dewey, education was not the unfolding of a fixed and pre-determined potential. While Hegel wholeheartedly supported public education, he believed that higher education would be reserved for men of *Bildung* who would go on to selflessly administer society. His political vision—more similar to Plato’s in its acceptance of intellectual inequality and hierarchy—was ultimately not quite egalitarian enough for Dewey’s democratic society. As Seyla Benhabib put it,

³⁷³ Geuss, “Kultur, Bildung, Geist,” 154.

Hegel imagined that while most citizens would go on “sink to the moment of mere ‘representation’ in the estates,” a highly educated, universal class of bureaucrats would ensure that the “rationality of the universal” is preserved in “a realm of professional expertise immune to the whims and mere opinion of the ‘rabble’.”³⁷⁴ Men of *Bildung* would, like Plato’s philosopher-kings, comprehend and protect the universal against the subjective passions of citizens.³⁷⁵ But while Dewey saw value in expertise, he insisted on a classless society. As with Plato, he criticized Hegel for an attachment to ends and for abstracting away from the individual to the point of erasing tangible distinctions between persons.

Although especially in his earlier work Dewey tended to underscore the social against the excessive individualism he attributed to American culture, he rejected any theory which did not also insist on what he termed “the complete development of personality” for all.³⁷⁶ That is, while Dewey fully accepted a ‘social efficiency’ view of education which tied it to fostering good citizenship and ensuring individuals participated in the economy, he insisted that in a democracy, social efficiency did not have to come at the cost of ‘personal culture,’ or the development of individuality. For Dewey, “if democracy has a moral and ideal meaning, it is that a social return can be demanded for all and that opportunity for development of distinctive capacities be afforded all.”³⁷⁷ But

³⁷⁴ Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, 98.

³⁷⁵ Women are excluded from the possibility of obtaining *Bildung* (Hegel, 213).

³⁷⁶ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 67.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

more than that, Dewey insisted that true social efficiency in a democracy actually *requires* the cultivation of the individuality of every one of its members.

Just as Dewey reconceived of individuality as fundamentally tied to the social, he offered a conception of social efficiency that was inextricably tied to the individual. In its broadest sense, Deweyian social efficiency is “neither more nor less than capacity to share in a given and take of experience” and “covers all that makes one’s own experience more worthwhile to others, and all that enables one to participate more richly in the worthwhile experiences of others.”³⁷⁸ By defining social efficiency in this way, Dewey was able to maintain that a society’s worth is tied to the worth it gives to every individual. Therefore, social efficiency is not achieved through the “negative constraint” of individuals, but by the “positive use of native individual capacities in occupations having a social meaning.”³⁷⁹ The fact that society is comprised of unique individuals is precisely what makes it “worth serving” in the first place.³⁸⁰ Society derives its meaning from the individuals that comprise it. In turn, individuals derive their meaning from their society.

Education as Growth

I have argued that Dewey was greatly inspired by Hegel, but he did have a critique of him. Dewey accused Hegel of excessively abstracting away from the actually

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 66.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 65.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 67.

existing self. This was not merely a pragmatic concern for Dewey: He was deeply concerned with how abstraction inevitably overlooks concrete individualities and particulars. Dewey criticized Hegel—and Plato and Rousseau before him—for positing a general, abstract ideal as the goal of an individual’s education and self-development. As Dewey wrote in “Self-Realization as the Moral Ideal” (1893), when the self is conceived in the abstract, this inevitably leads one to “set up a rigid self, and conceive of realization as filling up its empty framework.”³⁸¹ This results in an idea of education as the means by which the ideal, imagined self becomes a ‘real’ self. Dewey adamantly spurned this view. Instead, he advocated a new, non-teleological understanding of education as ‘growth’ that would always view the student as an actually existing person rather than a potential one. Although education as growth would always be present-oriented, it would still be intentional and progressive in its direction. Dewey claimed that his education as growth would have no purpose beyond itself, but as I will argue, this is misleading: Deweyian education exists to serve a progressive, democratic society.

Dewey criticized past traditions for insisting on an idea of education as development, wherein to develop is to work toward an abstract ideal. In these theories, the ‘real’ self is not what is but what might be. In contrast, for Dewey, the self is always “a concrete and specific activity,” and “any theory which makes the self a something to be realized, which makes the process of moral experience a process of gradually attaining this ideal self” should be rejected.³⁸² Self-realization does *not* consist in fulfilling “a

³⁸¹ Dewey, “Self-Realization as the Moral Ideal,” 43.

³⁸² *Ibid.*

presupposed fixed schema or outline.”³⁸³ Rather, self-realization is found in the present exercise of existing capacity. The self must always be thought of in tangible and specific terms.

According to Dewey, the self should be understood as that which is and acts in the present moment. In one of his most remembered lines, he wrote, “If I were asked to name the most needed of all reforms in the spirit of education, I should say: ‘Cease conceiving of education as mere preparation for later life, and make of it the full meaning of the present life.’”³⁸⁴ For Dewey, this meant that there is no general, ideal, and abstract capacity to be realized in the future through education, but only the capacities of a specific child in a given moment that must be exercised in the here and now. A child should not be educated toward an abstract ideal, but through the use of whatever capacities are actually manifest.

Put another way, Dewey thought a child’s supposed general capacity does not determine her end. Rather, her specific and concrete activities do. Capacity is “definite activity and not simply possibility of activity.”³⁸⁵ To take an example, Dewey defines “artistic capacity” *not* as the potential to be an artist, but as already observable abilities: “a certain quickness, vividness, and plasticity of vision, a certain deftness of hand, and a certain motor co-ordination by which his hand is stimulated to work in harmony with his eye.”³⁸⁶ In recognizing the child’s “artistic capacity,” he wrote, “we are not primarily

³⁸³ Ibid.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 46.

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

finding out what he may be, but what he is.”³⁸⁷ We are not seeing him move closer toward some ideal of an artist, but seeing him act artistically in the here and now.

While Dewey agreed that education is necessarily “a fostering, a nurturing, a cultivating, process,”³⁸⁸ he insisted that the traditional view of development which views its end as the realization of potentiality must be rejected. As he clarified in *Democracy and Education*:

When it is said that education is development, everything depends upon how development is conceived. Our net conclusion is that life is development, and that developing, growing, is life. Translated into its educational equivalents, that means (i) that the educational process has no end beyond itself; it is its own end; and that (ii) the educational process is one of continual reorganizing, reconstructing, transforming.³⁸⁹

In Plato’s *Republic*, the goal of education was to form producers, guardians, and—ideally—philosopher kings. For Rousseau, education would cultivate the child’s natural goodness, allowing what was good and implicit to develop without corruption.³⁹⁰ Even *Bildung* offered itself as a potential to be achieved through education, aided in Hegel’s view by institutions. Against these ends-oriented traditions, Dewey’s philosophy posited education as ‘growth’ for growth’s sake.

For Dewey, the purpose of all human beings is life, and life is growth. He writes, “the dominant vocation of all human beings at all times is living—intellectual and moral

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 48.

³⁸⁸ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 11.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 31.

³⁹⁰ For more of Dewey’s critique of Rousseau’s botanical idea of natural development see Dewey’s “The Need for a Philosophy of Education” (1934).

growth.”³⁹¹ Growth is not “about unity and conforming” or “bringing children up into adulthood.”³⁹² Rather, it is always occurring, even in adults, and the role of education is to enable continued growth for all. This meant that the self would never be finished, but in “continuous formation through choice of action.”³⁹³ Dewey saw this as the core insight provided by the modern discovery of evolution. But as he wrote in *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), his contemporaries had twisted evolution’s meaning and wrongly applied its lesson. Rather than understand evolution as furthering the “gospel of present growth,” evolution had been used “to teach a futile dogma of approximation,” as though the present must be made to serve a predetermined future point of development.³⁹⁴

As Dewey made clear in *Democracy and Education*, “Education as such has no aims. Only persons, parents, and teachers, etc., have aims, not an abstract idea like education.”³⁹⁵ To insist on a predetermined goal for education is to force education to serve an external goal. This particular claim led many critics, such as R. Hutchins, to accuse Dewey of lacking a vision of what it meant to be an ‘educated’ person.³⁹⁶ Dewey’s education was painted as directionless, offering no account of what does and

³⁹¹ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 162.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, 182.

³⁹⁴ Dewey and Murphey, *The Middle Works of John Dewey, Volume 14, 1899 - 1924*, 197.

³⁹⁵ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 59.

³⁹⁶ Waddington, “An Old Story: Dewey’s Account of the Opposition between the Intellectual and the Practical.”

does not count as education. But to claim that Dewey simply valued directionless activity or change for its own sake is not a fair reading of him. Dewey not only critiqued fellow progressives for their excessive aversion to organization and structure, he made clear that what he valued was not mere change or experience, but *educative* experience, by which he meant something more specific. Dewey did not claim that all activity counted as education because his understanding of growth was more exclusive than his critics appreciated.

While Dewey did think that education could be either incidental or formal (it need not be deliberate in order to qualify as education), he insisted that in order to be “truly educative” an experience must be one in which “instruction is conveyed and ability increased” and where there is an “added power of subsequent direction or control.”³⁹⁷ Striking at both conservative and progressive models of education, he wrote that true education is neither “routine” nor “capricious.”³⁹⁸ Something like “spontaneous self-expression” did not count as *real* education.³⁹⁹ Rather, true education is “that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience.”⁴⁰⁰ We can recognize education because it contributes meaning to experience and because it opens the learner up to more experiences.

³⁹⁷ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 45.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

As Dewey much later clarified in *Experience and Education* (1938), ‘education as growth’ can only be recognized as such through a holistic assessment that takes into account not simply whether a person is growing in their ability to carry out a particular activity but whether their capacity for growth in general is being increased as well:

“That a man may grow in efficiency as a burglar, as a gangster, or as a corrupt politician, cannot be doubted. But 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. Does this form of growth create conditions for further growth, or does it set up conditions that shut off the person who has grown in this particular direction from the occasions, stimuli, and opportunities for continuing growth in new directions?”⁴⁰¹

Dewey did not simply want to say that all change is growth and that all growth is educative. He wanted to retain an idea of “true” education. As such, all experience is not educative: “The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative.”⁴⁰² For Dewey, some experiences can in fact be ‘miseducative’ not because they fail to bring one closer to a specific educational goal but also because they restrict the possibilities for future growth. That is, Dewey insisted that “good” growth and “bad” growth could be distinguished according to whether or not they increased the possibilities for future growth beyond the narrow confines of the activity in question. If an experience made a person less open to new meaningful experiences by, for example, numbing her to life or leading him to a dead end, the experience could be classed as miseducative.

Whether Dewey’s definition of miseducative experiences encompasses all forms of narrow specialization in education is unclear. For Dewey, the psychological effect the

⁴⁰¹ Dewey and Cahn, “Experience and Education,” 19.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, 10.

experience has on the person and their future openness to experience is key, but one would expect this to vary from person to person. What is clear is that Dewey had an interest in maintaining a non-teleological vision of education that nevertheless maintained some distinction between ‘better’ and ‘worse.’ To give up this distinction would be to give up on the notion of progress that was so fundamental to his politics. But while Dewey was correct that evolution provides a model for non-teleological development, notions of ‘progress’ are imputed by humans to evolution. Humans might perceive evolution as always progressive, but this is a question of perception, not fact.

Dewey claimed that no eternal ideal or tradition can or should be the binding guide for future action, but he clearly provided one in the form of his ideal of education as growth. While Dewey asserted that there are no fixed and final ends to his education, he insisted on its progressivity: Dewey was quite clear in *Democracy and Education* that societies advance, progressing from the barbarian to the civilized. Education is integral to guarding and transmitting the science and technology that feed societal progress; it is selectively conservative but always progressive.

The fact that Dewey insisted that one must focus on the present in education and that one must teach not towards a future goal or with an idea of potential capacity in mind did not mean that his idea of education would not serve future progress. While seemingly oriented toward the present alone, Dewey thought that it is precisely by focusing on the present that preparation for the future is ensured. In other words, the future is served by the focus on the present: education must “progressively realize present possibilities, and thus make individuals better fitted to cope with latter requirements.”⁴⁰³ Education is the

realization of present capacities so that they become cultivated and therefore better able to meet the future present. Deweyian education is a kind of progress without end, it is forward movement toward a better state of ever-expanding opportunities at both the individual and social level. Ultimately, it is the progressive growth of the social organism.

For Dewey, faith in progressive education was synonymous with faith in democracy. As he admitted in *Democracy and Education*, only in a democratic society can education's aim be to "enable individuals to continue their education."⁴⁰⁴ Democratic society makes Deweyian education possible. Conversely, Dewey's particular vision of liberal-democratic society requires education in order to be realized. Dewey desired a democratic society that prizes continuous learning and social engagement, and for all of his criticisms of philosophies that presuppose an ideal to be educated toward, he could not avoid doing the same. Dewey presupposed the ideal of the ever-learning social and democratic citizen. A Deweyian education is not *mere* preparation for life, but it is preparation for democratic life as Dewey understood it.

The ultimate end of Deweyian education is the social and political progress of a democratic order. He admitted as much in "The Economic Situation: A Challenge to Education" (1932) when he wrote, "For the primary social duty of education is not to perpetuate the existing social order—economic, legal, and political—but to contribute to its betterment. This work is constructive and positive."⁴⁰⁵ While Dewey saw change as

⁴⁰³ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 34.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴⁰⁵ Dewey and Ratner, "The Economic Situation: A Challenge to Education," 125.

inevitable, he knew that progress is never guaranteed. He thought that one must use education to ensure that change is as synonymous with growth as possible. The site of this work, the key institution for realizing Dewey's vision, was the school.

School as Panacea

It was because Dewey maintained an idea of what counts as 'good' or 'true' education that he needed institutions to direct and channel the education as socialization that would otherwise occur organically. Dewey's idea of education was not aimless; it needed to serve a particular political vision. Like Plato and Rousseau, Dewey understood that "association is inherently educative," and like Plato and Rousseau, Dewey sought to control the terms of association.⁴⁰⁶ Rather than leave incidental education to chance, he believed an ideal environment could be intentionally designed in order to "produce" in the student "a certain system of behavior."⁴⁰⁷ Rather than focus on law or the family, Dewey saw institutionalized education as the ideal mechanism for realizing his educational-political vision through socialization. School reform would be the means of social reform. Dewey thought that by reimagining the school and its function in society one could ensure 'real' learning and a continuously progressive democratic order. If life is the only real teacher, Dewey concluded, one had to make the school "part of the life experience of the child" in order to be "truly educative" and effective.⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁶ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 11.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁰⁸ Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed," 88.

Dewey's writings on schooling reveal both the Dewey so often criticized for his engineering approach to social life as well as the Dewey who thought education could harmonize entrenched differences. As Alan Ryan notes with respect to Dewey on education, "One might unkindly call it a form of magical thinking, as though control over a symbolic representation of the outside world inside the classroom will give us control over the world itself."⁴⁰⁹ While Melvin Rogers is right to stress the Darwinism in Dewey, his portrait of him as a humble pluralist deeply sensitive to contingency and uncertainty is perhaps overstated.⁴¹⁰ While it's true that Dewey certainly thought that human agency was critical for ensuring progress, he clearly believed that a scientific approach to social life and schooling could result in progress and harmonize difference.

According to Dewey, schools are both the product of and the key to social progress. As he argued in *Democracy and Education*, schools are the necessary result of a society that has become so complex it cannot rely on oral transmission and association alone to preserve its collective experience. They arise when "social traditions are so complex that a considerable part of the social store is committed to writing and transmitted through written symbols."⁴¹¹ Schools emerge in order to preserve and pass on a society's accumulated knowledge, and this is primarily done through books. One problem with this, Dewey thought, is that schools have a tendency to make education

⁴⁰⁹ Ryan, Dewey, and Child, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*, 330.

⁴¹⁰ Rogers, "The People, Rhetoric, and Affect."

⁴¹¹ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 22.

“remote and dead” as well as “abstract and bookish.”⁴¹² That is, schools typically rely on impressions made by words and language to educate, but real (i.e., democratic) education must be a shared activity. For Dewey, true learning was the result of an internal change in the student that could only occur when she actively participated in the educational activity. In order to achieve true learning, then, the school should mirror the dynamic and associative world beyond its walls. The best school would be modeled after the “best” kind of home.⁴¹³

Therefore, the modern school should not cling to a narrow view of education as transmission, but employ education as socialization. Dewey thought this would not only make the education provided by schools more genuine and more effective, it would also socialize students and contribute to their civic formation. Students would become ideal democratic citizens not by learning lessons that could be found in books, but by partaking in “a community life” with their classmates and sharing “a common experience.”⁴¹⁴ Rather than encourage a “bookish” and “pseudointellectual spirit,” schools should enable and foster a “social spirit” instead.⁴¹⁵ For Dewey, democratic citizenship is not simply about voting, law-making, or governing, but also how individuals relate to each other in a

⁴¹² Dewey, 9.

⁴¹³ “There is no mystery about it, no wonderful discovery of pedagogy or educational theory. It is simply a question of doing systematically and in a large, intelligent, and competent way what for various reasons can be done in most households only in a comparatively meagre and haphazard manner” (Dewey, “The School and Society” (1899), 24) In *Love, Justice, and the Utopians*, William H. Schubert notes the class privilege inherent in Dewey’s analogy and the problems therein.

⁴¹⁴ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 2018, 185.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

holistic way. Citizenship is not a narrow political relationship, but “all the relationships of all sorts that are involved in membership in a community.”⁴¹⁶ Therefore, social activities in schools should not be considered distractions from “real” learning, but constitutive of a truly democratic education.

Although Dewey thought that the school should model itself on social life, he did not think it should be an exact replica of it. While the school should certainly be more contiguous with society, Dewey thought it could and should serve as a site of *intentional* socialization. That is, unlike the “real” world, Dewey imagined that the ideal school could be a “special environment” where adults could “consciously control the kind of education which the immature gets” by “controlling the information in which they act, and hence, think and feel.”⁴¹⁷ Unlike society-at-large, the mini-society of the school could be more easily designed and controlled to produce a generation better than the one before it. Through the use of testing and examination, it could further “test the child’s fitness for social life and reveal the place in which he can be of the most service and where he can receive the most help.”⁴¹⁸

Dewey saw the school as the ideal solution to Rousseau’s puzzle. How could one make a virtuous citizen when society is corrupt? One could redesign the school as an ideal mini-society for children who have not yet been corrupted. Dewey thought the

⁴¹⁶ John Dewey and Dr Sidney Hook Ph.D, “The School as Social Centre,” in *The Middle Works of John Dewey, Volume 2, 1899 - 1924: Journal Articles, Book Reviews, and Miscellany in the 1902-1903 Period, and Studies in Logical ...*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, 1st edition (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 84.

⁴¹⁷ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 2018, 15.

⁴¹⁸ Dewey, “My Pedagogic Creed,” 89.

school could help children transition into society by providing a “simplified environment” that becomes progressively more complicated as the child ages while taking an active role in deciding what should be filtered out of society in order to aid its progress.⁴¹⁹ School would be a gradual introduction to society, but not an exact mirror. Rather than preserve every element of society and tradition, the school should be selective about what is transmitted, keeping only what is worthy of being saved and purging that which does not contribute to a “better future society.”⁴²⁰ Moreover, the school should harmonize all of the diverse elements of society and thereby create a “new and broader environment” that is “homogenous and balanced for the young.”⁴²¹ The school should provide children with a means to escape the parochialism of their homes. In short, it should provide an experience of society not quite as it is, but as it could be in a more ideal form. As Dewey put it on his “Educational Ethics” syllabus at the University of Chicago, “society reflects itself in purified form in the school.”⁴²²

While the notion of a school as an ideal environment might imply a necessary degree of isolation from society, Dewey argued for just the opposite. Society, Dewey thought, should put its best self into its schools and keep those schools at its center. Like Plato and Rousseau, Dewey knew that true civic education would have to be continuous,

⁴¹⁹ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 2018, 16.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, 16–17.

⁴²² John Dewey, “Educational Ethics: Syllabus of a Course of Six Lecture-Studies,” in *The Early Works of John Dewey, Volume 5, 1882 - 1898: Early Essays, 1895-1898*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, 1st edition (Carbondale, Ill: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 200.

and he often lamented that most students left school by fourteen or fifteen. One could not simply socialize a child into a “complete” adult and then send him into society without further education. Dewey thought this idea of civic formation was especially misguided because it assumed an unchanging environment. The world according to Dewey was ever-changing, demanding constant adaptability from adults. The ideal mini-society of the school could therefore not only impact children; it had to be positioned to impact adults and thereby continue its influence. By placing schools at their center and not at their periphery, communities could hope to provide “a continuous education for all classes at whatever age.”⁴²³ Instead of being kept in a protected space away from society, schools should be for all members of society at all ages.

Beyond this rationale, Dewey thought it increasingly obvious that there were no truly separate spheres of life. Something was needed to tie the whole together and give it meaning, especially as traditional forms of authority were increasingly challenged. As he wrote in “The School as Social Centre” (1902), enforcing divisions between social institutions was neither possible nor desirable, as “different modes of social life” share in an “organic unity.”⁴²⁴ Rather than try to separate the school from politics and society, which were themselves intimately connected, it must infuse every aspect of life; it must “be related more widely,” “receive from more quarters,” and “give in more directions” than previously imagined.⁴²⁵ Dewey saw in the school a new and better means of

⁴²³ Dewey and Hook, “The School as Social Centre,” 90.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

community than other socializing institutions such as the family or the church. The school could provide a new and better model for society. It could even educate people to appreciate “higher forms” of entertainment and provide alternatives to “cheap and easy amusements.”⁴²⁶ In his most utopic renderings, Dewey imagines the school as integrating and supplementing every aspect of an individual’s life, helping her to continually find meaning in her place in the world.

While Dewey also acknowledged that schools “are only one among many factors, and that their shaping influence will be most helpful when it falls in line with social forces operating outside the schools,” he insisted that one could no longer rely on those forces to train individuals for social life.⁴²⁷ The school must “give the young the things they need in order to develop in an orderly, sequential way into members of society,” and it must, in “its forms and methods, be an outgrowth of the needs of the society in which it exists.”⁴²⁸ It is in Dewey’s writings on schooling that one can fully appreciate the extent to which education’s end is social and political for him. Although Dewey insisted that education and schooling were not synonymous, he meant that the meaning of education is not encompassed by traditional notions of schooling, that it is always ongoing and really a product of association. Dewey thought schools should be reimagined to reflect and

⁴²⁶ John Dewey and Professor Carl Cohen, “Social Purposes in Education,” in *The Middle Works of John Dewey, Volume 15, 1899 - 1924: Journal Articles, Essays, and Miscellany Published in the 1923-1924 Period*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, 1st edition (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 168.

⁴²⁷ Dewey and Konvitz, “Character Training for Youth,” 190.

⁴²⁸ Dewey and Konvitz, “Why Have Progressive Schools?,” 147–48.

perfect this kind of learning through socialization, and he firmly rejected the idea of schools as ivory towers or insular communities.

The role Dewey envisioned for schools meant that schools could not and should not shy away from politics. In pieces like “Education as Politics” (1922) and “The School as Means of Developing a Social Consciousness and Social Ideals in Children” (1923), Dewey wrote about how the school should use relevant materials, deal with the real world, and seek to cultivate a “genuine patriotism” that would combat anti-immigrant sentiment. Dewey was clear that in envisioning a political role for schools he was not suggesting that they indoctrinate students or provide a nationalistic education on the model of Japan, Italy, the U.S.S.R. or Germany. Dewey distinguished his call for a national education from a nationalistic education by insisting that the former is “an outgrowth from the people” that “develops from below” and not forced upon the people from above by the government.⁴²⁹ Angered by accusations in the 1930s that schools had become breeding grounds for socialism, Dewey insisted that there were more worrisome sources of indoctrination and propaganda, such as the Hearst press and the radio.⁴³⁰ While schools would certainly “form attitudes,” he thought, “the tendency to form attitudes which will express themselves in intelligent social action is something very

⁴²⁹ John Dewey and Professor John J. McDermott, “Toward a National System of Education,” in *The Later Works of John Dewey, Volume 11, 1925 - 1953: Essays, Reviews, Trotsky Inquiry, Miscellany, and Liberalism and Social Action*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, 1st edition (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 357.

⁴³⁰ John Dewey and Professor John J. McDermott, “The Crucial Role of Intelligence,” in *The Later Works of John Dewey, Volume 11, 1925 - 1953: Essays, Reviews, Trotsky Inquiry, Miscellany, and Liberalism and Social Action*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, 1st edition (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 342–44.

different from indoctrination.”⁴³¹ Dewey thought he could draw a clear distinction between helping students become intelligent political actors and inculcating them with political beliefs.

In *Democratic Education*, Amy Gutmann questions how Dewey understood the relationship between the structures of the school and the society beyond it. Pointing to the practices of Dewey’s Laboratory School at the University of Chicago for insight, she notes some of its decidedly undemocratic elements: Students did not rule the school and teachers were a clear authority who decided curriculum together and with Dewey. Gutmann concludes, “It was an embryonic democratic society because it elicited a commitment to learning and cultivated the prototypically democratic virtues among its students, not because it treated them as the political or intellectual equals of its teachers.”⁴³²

Similarly interested in how schools might be structured to model democratic society, Jason Kosnoski notes that Dewey “never explicitly equates classroom discussion with deliberative association.”⁴³³ As I read him, Dewey was most interested in cultivating a certain sociability in students and a disposition that would make them good democratic citizens. Dewey saw democracy as more than structures and institutions designed to

⁴³¹ John Dewey and Professor John J. McDermott, “The Challenge of Democracy to Education,” in *The Later Works of John Dewey, Volume 11, 1925 - 1953: Essays, Reviews, Trotsky Inquiry, Miscellany, and Liberalism and Social Action*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, 1st edition (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 188.

⁴³² Gutmann, *Democratic Education*, (Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁴³³ Jason Kosnoski, “Artful Discussion: John Dewey’s Classroom as a Model of Deliberative Association,” *Political Theory* 33, no. 5 (2005): 654–77.

channel individual agents. As Alan Ryan put it, he wanted a society “permeated by a certain kind of character, by a mutual regard of all citizens for all other citizens.”⁴³⁴

While structures certainly influence agents, and while Dewey certainly advocated for structural changes in how the classroom was arranged, he thought schools could and should socialize students through other, less formal mechanisms inside and outside the classroom.

Moreover, he wanted teachers to operate as expert professionals realizing a progressive vision and would not have thought it appropriate to treat students as though they were equal authorities. Dewey claimed that schools simply cannot be politically neutral and will always influence society. This inescapable fact presented educators with three choices: (1) to “perpetuate the present confusion and possibly increase it,” (2) to “select the new scientific, technological, and cultural forces that are producing change in the old order,” or (3) to “become intelligently conservative and strive to make the schools a force in painting the old order intact against the impact of new forces.”⁴³⁵ Deeming the first option indefensible and the third understandable, Dewey insisted that schools should be a progressive force in society and that they should herald scientific, technological, and cultural change.

Dewey thought that by embracing ‘intelligent’ change, schools could fulfill their unique capacity as the most fundamental and meaningful way to bring about social

⁴³⁴ Ryan, Dewey, and Child, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*, 25.

⁴³⁵ John Dewey and Professor John J. McDermott, “Education and Social Change,” in *The Later Works of John Dewey, Volume 11, 1925 - 1953: Essays, Reviews, Trotsky Inquiry, Miscellany, and Liberalism and Social Action*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, 1st edition (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 412.

reform. As he put it in *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (1922), “The cold fact of the situation is that the chief means of continuous, graded, economical improvement and social rectification lies in utilizing the opportunities of educating the young to modify prevailing types of thought and desire.”⁴³⁶ Rather than focus on gaining and storing knowledge, education could and should be focused on “creating attitudes by shaping desires and developing the needs that are significant in the process of living.”⁴³⁷ For Dewey, education offered a slow but steady means of achieving social and economic progress by reshaping the thoughts and desires of society via its youth.

While Dewey did not think that schools could “in any literal sense be the builders of a new social order,” he did think they would “*share* in the building of the social order of the future” by aligning with “this or that movement of existing social forces.”⁴³⁸ Against Marxist critiques which insisted that schools could not be sources of change and progress, that they could only ever perpetuate the ideology of the ruling class, and that proper school reform could only follow a true revolution, Dewey argued that “there is no basis whatever, save doctrinaire absolutism, for the belief that a complete economic change will produce of itself the mental, moral, and cultural changes that are necessary

⁴³⁶ Dewey and Murphey, *The Middle Works of John Dewey, Volume 14, 1899 - 1924*, 89.

⁴³⁷ John Dewey and Professor Emeritus Milton R. Konvitz, “Dewey Outlines Utopian Schools,” in *The Later Works of John Dewey, Volume 9, 1925 - 1953: 1933-1934, Essays, Reviews, Miscellany, and A Common Faith*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, 1st edition (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 139.

⁴³⁸ Dewey and Konvitz, “Can Education Share in Social Reconstruction?,” 207.

for its enduring success.”⁴³⁹ While Alison Kadlec roots Dewey’s problems with Marxism in its rigidity, it was fundamentally Marxism’s theory of change that Dewey thought problematic.⁴⁴⁰ A *real* revolution would require a more fundamental and internal change, and while schools could not be “a sufficient condition” for achieving this, they were certainly necessary.⁴⁴¹

While James Campbell is right to note that Dewey was more aware of “the practical limits of the educational process” than critics tend to realize, it is nevertheless where Dewey placed his greatest hope for social change.⁴⁴² As Cornell West put it, “Dewey adopts a gradualist view of social change and remains a reformer rather than a revolutionary.”⁴⁴³ On his reading, Dewey’s emphasis on discussion and education is problematic because it leads him away from “confrontational politics and agitational struggle.”⁴⁴⁴ Relatedly, R.W. Hildreth sees in Dewey’s pragmatism a failure to deal with conflict and power, avoiding “the question of the necessary political leverage for social change unaddressed.”⁴⁴⁵ But for Dewey, schools offered a real possibility of changing the

⁴³⁹ Dewey and McDermott, “Education and Social Change,” 414.

⁴⁴⁰ Kadlec, *Dewey’s Critical Pragmatism*.

⁴⁴¹ Dewey and McDermott, “Education and Social Change,” 414.

⁴⁴² James Campbell, *Understanding John Dewey: Nature and Cooperative Intelligence* (Chicago, Ill: Open Court, 1995), 216.

⁴⁴³ West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, 102.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁴⁴⁵ R. W. Hildreth, “Reconstructing Dewey on Power,” *Political Theory* 37, no. 6 (2009): 800. More recently, Alexander Livingston has offered an important response to the portrayal of Dewey as insensitive to power politics, by pointing to his work on “direct

fundamental dispositions needed to make any revolution a lasting one. By building and modeling community and interdependence, he thought, the right social changes would follow with time.

Ironically, as Dewey mused in an address published in *The New York Times* in 1933, in a perfect world, he thought there would be no schools at all.⁴⁴⁶ If society were perfect, there would be no need for schools as everyone would be continuously educated through their direct participation in society. But an imperfect society requires schools to harmonize it, purify it, and show the way toward a better future. Dewey saw the school as society's most powerful instrument for intelligently directing and controlling education. His vision of schooling exposes the lie that in a Deweyian vision education serves no end beyond itself. For Dewey, education is always for becoming, and more specifically, for social and political progress.

Rejection of Solitude

While Plato was deeply interested in education as a social question, he also portrayed and honored a Socrates who would lose himself in thought and disappear to a place within himself. For his part, Rousseau increasingly retreated to solitude throughout his life and determined that “true” philosophers and scientists were incompatible with society. In sharp contrast to these thinkers, for Dewey, education was always linked to

action, strikes, and class struggle” and showing how he advocates for “coercive and nondeliberative modes of political action as democratic means for democratic ends.” Alexander Livingston, “Between Means and Ends: Reconstructing Coercion in Dewey’s Democratic Theory,” *The American Political Science Review* 111, no. 3 (August 2017): 522.

⁴⁴⁶ Dewey and Konvitz, “Dewey Outlines Utopian Schools.”

social utility and never exemplified by solitary contemplation. There was no truth to be sought apart from becoming or in isolation. Both Dewey's philosophy of education and his philosophy of selfhood foreclose the possibility of education as a purely private, truth-seeking activity. While Plato and Rousseau understood a kind of education apart from becoming and perhaps best pursued in solitude, Dewey disavowed this inward turn. He rejected any suggestion that true education is what happens apart from the social world, be it outside a cave or alone in nature.

Dewey rejected solitary education by definition. For Dewey, education in all its forms simply cannot exist apart from society, and what I have called truth-seeking inquiry was no exception. It too is fundamentally and inescapably social, occurring only in relation to society. Education as truth-seeking inquiry is neither a threat to democracy nor threatened by it in part because there is no necessary tension between the pursuit of truth and living a social or political life. There is no choice to be made between the private student and the public servant. Dewey thought that in a democracy it is especially imperative to do away with isolationism. Democracies must make thought a guide for action and view leisure time an opportunity for serving others, not an opportunity for escape.⁴⁴⁷ As Westbrook correctly summarized, Dewey's liberalism was "liberalism that had to meet the demands of democracy, not democracy that had to answer to liberalism."

Dewey's own conception of education as truth-seeking inquiry drew heavily on the scientific method and assumed a problem-solving approach to the world. For him, inquiry always had to have a social dimension and ultimately link back to becoming.

⁴⁴⁷ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 2018, 117.

Long-critiqued for being excessively optimistic and leading, ultimately, to a vision of social engineering, scholars have defended it as more open and complex than it appears. Pointing to Dewey's Darwinism, Jim Garrison insists that Dewey's pragmatist instrumentalism should not be confused with logical positivism.⁴⁴⁸ Similarly, for Melvin Rogers, Dewey's inquiry is not about what is, but always what might be; it is therefore experimental and contingent.⁴⁴⁹ One must consider, though, whether Dewey's conception of inquiry truly leaves enough space for the parts of science and education that are less about method or problem solving and more about dreaming and imagination.⁴⁵⁰ In any case, my own concern with Dewey's conception of inquiry is not that it is too rigid or positivistic, but that it has no place for truth apart from becoming, and relatedly, for solitude. As Alan Ryan quipped, "The introspective non-joiner gets rather short shrift in Dewey's universe."⁴⁵¹

In emphasizing the social, utilitarian nature of education, Dewey was in part reacting against a tradition he attributed to the "leisure class"—the idea that "the most valuable teaching is that which is furthest from any useful application, even when that

⁴⁴⁸ Jim Garrison, "John Dewey's Theory of Practical Reasoning," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 31, no. 3 (January 1999): 291–312.

⁴⁴⁹ Rogers, "The Undiscovered Dewey."

⁴⁵⁰ Nel Noddings suggests Dewey is excessively oriented toward problems and on the one hand ignores the importance of learning "routine skills" and on the other hand has little to say about "musing, daydreaming, and the mental equivalent of walking in fields." Nel Noddings, *Philosophy of Education* (Routledge, 2018), 276.

⁴⁵¹ Ryan, Dewey, and Child, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*, 148.

application consists of serving the state."⁴⁵² For Dewey, the insistence on a division between "pure knowledge" and "applied or professional knowledge" was yet another false dichotomy. He maintained that a practical education can also be intellectual. As such, curriculum design should reject the idea that some subjects are inherently practical and others merely ornamental. All subjects should have both instrumental and aesthetic value for the student at some point in the course of study. Importantly, Dewey was not advocating a view of education as a private, instrumental good for private, economic advancement. Rather, he stressed the instrumental *and* social character of all education.

As I have already suggested, in emphasizing the social utility of education, Dewey was not merely objecting to an emphasis on selfish materialism in education, but to the fundamental understanding of the individual that this common view presupposed. As Dewey wrote in "Ethical Principles Underlying Education" (1897), "Society is a society of individuals and the individual is always a social individual. He has no existence by himself. He lives in, for, and by society, just as society has no existence excepting in and through the individuals who constitute it."⁴⁵³ This is why Dewey was also critical of those who stressed education as a means of character formation in the traditional sense, writing that those who claimed that education is about the "harmonious development of all the powers of the individual" failed to see that these terms have no meaning apart from society.⁴⁵⁴ To speak of "character" is to speak of "a vague and

⁴⁵² Dewey and Ross, "Education from a Social Perspective," 118.

⁴⁵³ Dewey, "Ethical Principles Underlying Education," 55.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

abstract concept with no real content.”⁴⁵⁵ Dewey insisted that character only has meaning as concrete social capacities. It could not, therefore, be developed in isolation, but only in association with others.

Although in his later works Dewey did come to emphasize the importance of individualism more, as I will demonstrate, his underlying view of the individual as fundamentally social never wavered. In his *Psychology* (1887), Dewey concluded that “No individual can realize himself in impersonal relations—relations of things to each other or to an ideal. He can truly develop himself only in self-conscious activity, in personality, and this is impossible without relations to other persons.”⁴⁵⁶ Dewey’s point in this early work was not simply that society offers the only means to self-realization; he was suggesting a radical blurring of any boundaries between inner and outer existence. Insensitive to the value of cultivating a rich inner life, Dewey saw the cultivation of an inward, private self apart from society as undesirable and even harmful. “Emotion turned inward” rather than outward “upon objects” was especially dangerous, as it led one to become either “jaded” or “restless.”⁴⁵⁷ While Dewey admitted that the self necessarily has “private states,” he insisted they “exist not for their own sake, but as the medium through which the universe makes its significance and value apparent.”⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁴⁵⁶ John Dewey, *The Early Works of John Dewey, Volume 2, 1882 - 1898: Psychology, 1887*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, 1st edition (Carbondale, Ill: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 281.

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 259.

For Dewey, whether one is turned inward or outward marks a crucial distinction between wonder and curiosity. Wonder, Dewey thought, is when one is attuned to external objects. In that case, the activity is “for the sake of the object” and not “for the sake of satisfying the personal emotion of wonder,” which is best defined as curiosity.⁴⁵⁹ Put differently, “wonder,” for Dewey, is “the emotional outing of the mind toward the universe” and therefore “utterly incomprehensible as a purely personal or selfish feeling.”⁴⁶⁰ As he later wrote in *How We Think* (1910), teachers are tasked with preserving and directing childhood curiosity toward the higher, proper ends of wonder.⁴⁶¹ Offering a moving description of how great minds are marked by their ability to wonder at the familiar, Dewey credits wonder with the genesis and continuation of science.⁴⁶² He roots the desire to know the “universe of objects” in the desire to know our “true” selves. In other words, the true self is found outside itself.

This is why in his “Pedagogic Creed” (1897), Dewey insisted that “the social and the psychological are the two ‘sides’ of the ‘educational process’” and that “neither can be subordinated to the other or neglected without evil results following. For Dewey,

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 262.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., 259.

⁴⁶¹ John Dewey, *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process* (Lexington, MA: D C Heath & Co, 1985), 207.

⁴⁶² The antithesis of Dewey’s conception of wonder is the scholastic who is obsessed with collecting and saving the past for its own sake and not in order to be used. In “The Scholastic and the Speculator” Dewey offers a harsh critique of this figure as useless scribblers who ultimately conceal reality with their “writing upon writings.” John Dewey, “The Scholastic and the Speculator,” in *The Early Works of John Dewey, Volume 3, 1882 - 1898: Essays and Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics, 1889-1892*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, 1st edition (Carbondale, Ill: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 152.

‘individuality’ meant that no one could be substituted for another *and* that each had something to contribute to society. To develop one’s individuality was to develop one’s unique contribution to society. In the same text, Dewey goes so far as to claim:

The only true education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself. Through these demands he is stimulated to act as a member of a unity, to emerge from his original narrowness of action and feeling and to conceive of himself from the standpoint of the welfare of the group to which he belongs.⁴⁶³

As Ivan Illich read Dewey, his “idea of individuality [does not] preclude the self-conscious reflectiveness one associates with personal autonomy,” but it does “insist that whatever individuality is will depend ultimately on the social context in which individuality comes to be.”⁴⁶⁴

As Dewey wrote in a later essay, one cannot know oneself in the clouds, in “the world to which philosophy was brought: a world which was the heavy and sunken centre of hierarchic heavens located in their purity and refinement as remotely as possible from the gross and muddy vesture of earth.”⁴⁶⁵ On his reading, Aristotle is especially guilty of placing thought on a pedestal apart from action. Unlike Aristotle, the “conservative” who “gloried in the exaltation of intelligence in man above civic excellence and social need; and thereby isolated the life of truest knowledge from contact with social experience and from responsibility for discrimination of values in the course of life,” Plato, the

⁴⁶³ Dewey, “My Pedagogic Creed,” 84.

⁴⁶⁴ Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society*, New edition edition (London: Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd, 2000), 70.

⁴⁶⁵ Dewey, “Intelligence and Morals,” 34.

“reformer” and “radical” insisted that those with insight return to and serve society.⁴⁶⁶

Philosopher kings had to resist the temptation to see themselves as separate from society and capable of existing outside the cave.

In later works, Dewey continued to express his ire for Aristotle’s identification of contemplation as the highest good.⁴⁶⁷ In *Democracy and Education* (1916), Dewey rejected the elevation of mind above all else, insisting that it is only “one factor partaking along with others in the production of consequences.”⁴⁶⁸ The mind is an agent of change that responds to the environment with a view to action.⁴⁶⁹ It acts as a kind of axis. It is very much a part of the world of existing ideas and beliefs, and it finds new connections and conceptions that deviate from what exists. The individual is the agent through which existing beliefs are transformed, and progress occurs because of the great variation between individuals in their “observation, imagination, judgment, and invention.”⁴⁷⁰ That is, ideas are able to evolve and change into new ones because they transform through individuals who are always themselves a part of existing knowledge and society. The individual is a medium, not a wholly independent being who exists in isolation and

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., 33.

⁴⁶⁷ Dewey and Ross, “Education from a Social Perspective,” 116. Notably, some scholars have insisted on reading Dewey as nevertheless inspired by Aristotle. See Rogers, “The Undiscovered Dewey” and “Action and Inquiry in Dewey’s Philosophy.”

⁴⁶⁸ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 2018, 73.

⁴⁶⁹ Notably, modern neuroscience is aligned with Dewey’s world view of the embodied mind and embedded organism. See Mark Johnson, “Cognitive Science and Dewey’s Theory of Mind,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates*, ed. Donald R. Morrison, Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 123–44.

⁴⁷⁰ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 2018, 155.

creates knowledge. To source knowledge in the individual, Dewey thought, was to threaten “the ties which bind the mental life of one to that of his fellows.”⁴⁷¹ This denial could only lead to division and a failure to recognize that all individuals are part of a whole of knowledge that they jointly influence and are influenced by.

It was not just a matter of consequences, but it a matter of fact for Dewey: The private student does not really exist because the mind is in the world and of the world, and all knowledge is in the interest of society. Thinking is fundamentally linked to experience and action: “The material of thinking is not thoughts, but actions, facts, events, and the relations of things.”⁴⁷² Learning should never be locked “into a purely individual consciousness” but directed back toward the social.⁴⁷³ Any understanding of education which allows individuals to become separate or, as he puts it, “isolated” was false and should be avoided at all costs. Departing starkly from Rousseau’s image of the true philosopher in exile, he remained much closer to Plato’s philosopher king in service of society.

Although in his much later works, Dewey did begin to stress the individual more, he admitted in “I Believe” (1939) that this shift did not reflect any fundamental change in his belief or conception of individuality. Rather, Dewey adjusted his emphasis because he witnessed how “the rise of dictatorships and totalitarian states and the decline of democracy [were] accompanied with loud proclamation of the idea that only the state, the

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., 155.

⁴⁷² Ibid., 85.

⁴⁷³ Ibid., 157.

political organization of society, can give security to individuals.”⁴⁷⁴ Growing calls for total, unthinking allegiance led Dewey to stress the role of individual agency in shaping the social conditions so integral to self-development and self-realization.

At the same time, the changing political climate only further proved his conviction that “democratic institutions are no guarantee for the existence of democratic individuals.”⁴⁷⁵ In the end, education always remained central to the realization of Dewey’s liberal-democratic political vision. Education was for becoming and for truth-seeking in service of becoming. He stood by the importance of educating unique individuals for a democratic society through community and association, and he insisted that schools offered the key to progress. For Dewey, it was imperative that education in all its forms always ultimately serve society and its interests. It could never be and should never be a refuge from it.

⁴⁷⁴ John Dewey and R. W. Sleeper, “I Believe,” in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953: 1939-1941/Essays, Reviews, and Miscellany, Vol. 14*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, 1st edition (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 91.

⁴⁷⁵ Dewey and Sleeper, 92.

Realizing the Revolution: Freire's Critical Pedagogy

Despite their differences, Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey all recognized socialization as the most promising mode of education for shaping children into adults who suited their politics. Each focused on the best way to structure social environments to form children through the right experiences. In this chapter, I turn to the work of Brazilian thinker Paulo Freire who offered this challenge to their approach: What if the most decisive factor in a person's formation is not experience itself, but their understanding of that experience? What if, instead of turning children into ideal citizens through the right law, culture, home, or school, one could begin with non-ideal adults instead? Known primarily for his teaching methods and for his role as a founder of critical pedagogy, Freire is not typically recognized as a political theorist. However, as I will argue in this chapter, Freire's thought does offer a political theory of education that belongs in the tradition of Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey.

As I will also argue in this chapter, Freire represents the most extreme version of the position that there is no distinction to be made between an education as the activity of searching for truth and education as an instrument for becoming an ideal self or society. Taking adult education as his starting point, Freire turned away from the idea that children must be slowly shaped and socialized into ideal citizens, men, or liberal democrats. Instead, he insisted that education as inquiry can transform those who have already been socialized under non-ideal conditions. Instead of beginning with the unsocialized child, Freire began with the socialized adult. He suggested that a theory of *unlearning* or reeducation for adults may be more effective than the alternative,

particularly if the goal is not gradual social change and progress but revolution and transformation. Unlike Dewey, who still stressed socialization and believed that truth-seeking inquiry could be made compatible with, even essential to, a dynamic and ever-progressing democratic order, Freire took inquiry to be central to his theory precisely because of its fundamentally disruptive quality. Because Freire's understanding of becoming and the achievement of an ideal self and society hinged on the exposure of ideology, on the realization of truth in order to achieve justice, he wrongly collapsed education for truth into education for becoming, rendering them synonymous.

For Freire, "authentic" education is found in resisting the forces of both socialization and transmission through constant critique and action via inquiry. It is education in the mode of inquiry, but an inquiry that must always be self-consciously political and unapologetic about the threat it poses to the status quo. Denouncing the traditional school and its "banking" model of teaching and learning, Freire sought to redefine education as a praxis that prompts critical consciousness and radical political action. Like Rousseau, Freire was worried about the negative effects of being socialized by and for a corrupt society. But rather than use education to protect and cultivate independent judgment and goodness at the level of the individual, Freire sought to weaponize education to transform the dominant culture and its structures. In Freire's view, a true education based in inquiry could prompt students to investigate the "why" of their experiences. This would turn them into ideal political actors who could not only reread their reality, but rewrite it.

According to Freire, forming citizens is therefore neither a question of transmitting knowledge, nor a question of socializing them in the right way. True citizens

are not created through correct formation from childhood, but by challenging how people of every age understand the world and themselves in it. Freire maintained that much of life is experienced on a kind of automatic setting, and he insisted that the task of education is to problematize reality and to draw attention to causes in a way that spurs political transformation. Whereas Dewey sought active participants in a progressive, liberal-democratic order, Freire wanted radicals and revolutionaries who would always struggle against order in the name of justice.

Influenced by Marxism, the Frankfurt School and liberation theology, Freire articulated a vision of political education aimed at cultivating the class consciousness and political action required for “permanent” revolution. His vision was not one of intellectuals liberating the masses, but one of joint inquiry between teacher-students and student-teachers that would result in what he termed the “mutual humanization” of all. For Freire, education is not merely a prerequisite for revolution, but an ongoing and integral part of what it means to be free and human. One cannot really exist in any meaningful way, Freire thought, if one is not educated to social and political consciousness.

Like Dewey, Freire asserted the fundamentally social nature of both education and the human self. He held that education is always political and only ever possible in community with others, and he charged all who say otherwise with deception or naivete. For him, education can never be neutral and inquiry always has political consequences. Of all the thinkers, Freire was the most adamant that education is not so much an instrument of politics but politics itself. Because educational activity always serves a political interest, he claimed, one must choose between serving those in power and

serving those oppressed by that power. He thought it neither possible nor desirable to separate education from politics, concluding that one must always decide whether to use education to maintain an unjust status quo that enables and endorses oppression or to continuously fight for justice and liberation.

Rejecting any “purist” understanding of education beyond politics, Freire revealed how inquiry could connect us to others and spur political action. What he could not understand was inquiry’s equally powerful ability to drive us to wonder in stillness or solitude. Inquiry was always about becoming for Freire, and never about simply being with truth. Freire claimed to care for openness, doubt, and uncertainty, but he insisted on sharp dichotomies and self-definitions. He constantly stressed tensions but had no patience for aporias, wrongly limiting what questions and knowledge are worthy of pursuit by insisting that all questions must have answers and all knowledge must imply action toward becoming. Like Dewey, he foreclosed the possibility of a kind of education that does not already implicate and serve the interests of becoming a better self or society. In forcing a necessarily interdependent relationship between truth-seeking and becoming, Freire wrongly assumes that what is true will always lead to the ideal and that understanding truth never has independent value or meaning of its own. In denying the possibility of their separation, he embedded in the activity of truth-seeking an imperative to act along with the assumption that such action will serve progress by realizing more ideal selves and societies. In so doing, his theory not only jeopardizes learning the truth he claimed to want, but ultimately sacrifices it to becoming.

A Teacher-Politician

Before his heart attack and death on May 2, 1997, Freire was increasingly disturbed by the post-Cold War “neoliberal” vision of education as a “neutral” means to a good life. He was further troubled by the trend toward “scientific” approaches to the study and practice of teaching and learning.⁴⁷⁶ One of the core tenets of Freire’s theory is that education can never be neutral and that all education is political. Although Freire was often criticized for being a politician rather than a teacher, he never took this as an insult. For him, all politicians are teachers and all teachers are politicians. Various dismissed as both an elitist and a populist, Freire was above all, I argue, a political theorist, and the failure to read him as such has distorted his reception in North America.

Paulo Reglus Neves Freire was born in Recife, Brazil in 1921 to a middle-class family that fell into poverty during the Great Depression. Freire, who lost his father when he was thirteen, described himself and his siblings as “connective” children who were between two social classes. As he wrote in letters to his niece:

We participated in the world of those who ate well, even though we had very little to eat ourselves, and in the world of kids from very poor neighborhoods on the outskirts of town. We were linked to the former by our middle-class position; we were connected to the latter by our hunger, even though our hardships were less than theirs.⁴⁷⁷

Through the efforts of his mother, Freire was still able to pursue education, and eventually his family’s financial situation recovered. But this experience as an “intermediate” or “conjunction” child affected him deeply, and he often noted how it

⁴⁷⁶ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998).

⁴⁷⁷ Paulo Freire, *Letters to Cristina* (Routledge, 2016), 21.

caused him to question what accounts for the difference between classes and why it is that some people have plenty to eat while others starve.⁴⁷⁸

In his twenties Freire went on to study law, but he never practiced. Instead, he taught Portuguese in secondary school and went on to work in government. By then, he was already married to his first wife, Elza Maia Costa de Oliveira, whom he frequently and lovingly credited with first drawing his attention to questions of pedagogy.⁴⁷⁹ In 1959, he earned his doctorate and became a tenured professor in the history and philosophy of education.⁴⁸⁰ A teacher, scholar, and public servant, Freire's work and study centered around adult education and literacy campaigns. What set him apart from others engaged in this work was his method. Rather than use ready-made primers to teach the rural poor to read, Freire insisted on locally-developed materials grounded in the everyday experiences of learners. In his "culture circles," students would not simply learn how to read and write, but engage in discussions about their reality. Put another way, he connected the act of reading and writing words to that of rereading and rewriting the world.

Freire's methods drew the unwelcome attention of the authorities who took over Brazil in its 1964 military coup. Labelled a communist, he was jailed twice and

⁴⁷⁸ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Commitment* (Routledge, 2015), 67.

⁴⁷⁹ See, for example, Paulo Freire, *Politics and Education* (UCLA Latin American Center Publications, 1998), 179. Married for over forty years until Elza's death, he had five children with her and was devastated by her passing. In 1988, he found new life in a second marriage to another former student, Ana Maria (Nita) Araújo Freire, who has continued his work and legacy (Freire, *The Paulo Freire Reader*, x).

⁴⁸⁰ Paulo Freire, *The Paulo Freire Reader* (Continuum, 1998), 15–16.

interrogated, and when it became clear that he would be arrested once again, he fled into exile, first to Bolivia and then to Chile. It was not Freire's imprisonment—which lasted a total of 75 days—but his exile that most profoundly influenced his thought.⁴⁸¹ His most famous work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, was written in Chile and published in 1968. Appearing in English in 1970, it would not be published in its original Portuguese until 1974. By then, Freire had become internationally recognized and read.⁴⁸² Offered a visiting professorship at Harvard, Freire spent some time in the United States before moving to Geneva. There, he became involved in a number of projects, including advising education reform in former colonies in Africa. In total, he spent sixteen years in exile before returning to Brazil and continuing his work in government and education.⁴⁸³

A prolific writer, Freire was unapologetically as political as he was theoretical, and his theory was always rooted in his practice.⁴⁸⁴ But despite the fact that he embodied every sense of the term “political theorist,” Freire remains relatively unknown as such. Instead, he is mainly known and read by educators and education scholars as a founder of “critical pedagogy,” a philosophy of education and approach to teaching known for its

⁴⁸¹ Freire, *Politics and Education*, 179.

⁴⁸² Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (A&C Black, 2014), 119.

⁴⁸³ Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey, 1985), 181.

⁴⁸⁴ “Thought and study alone did not produce *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; it is rooted in concrete situations and describes the reactions of laborers (peasant or urban) and of middle-class persons whom I have observed directly or indirectly during the course of my educative work” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 37).

emphasis on dialogue and critique.⁴⁸⁵ In effect, Freire is known more for his teaching methods than for his political theory. The reason why, I argue, has more to do with his intellectual trajectory and reception abroad than it does with the substance of his thought.

Freire began as a linguist before turning to pedagogy and politics, but political philosophy was always of interest to him. Although one cannot be certain that he read all of the books he purchased, Freire kept a handwritten book record until 1955 that offers some insight into his earliest influences.⁴⁸⁶ Works by Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey are listed among the 572 entries, and his own work explicitly cites Plato and Dewey.⁴⁸⁷ Mostly, however, Freire preferred to be in conversation with Marxists, critical theorists, and post-colonial thinkers. He frequently cited Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, and Frantz Fanon—none of whom, curiously, are listed in his early book record.⁴⁸⁸ Freire was especially drawn to those figures who, like him, straddled the realms of thought and action, and he frequently praised Che Guevara and Amílcar Cabral.

In addition to Marxism, the other great influence on Freire’s thought was Catholic liberation theology. Of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he wrote, “I am certain that

⁴⁸⁵ Rare exceptions, Harry Boyte (2011) and Gustavo H. Dalaqua (2019) have published on Freire in leading political theory journals in the United States. Paul Apostolidis (2021), a political scientist, has also conducted Freirian-inspired research on precarity and day laborers.

⁴⁸⁶ Freire, *Letters to Cristina*, 225.

⁴⁸⁷ For Plato, see *Cultural Action for Freedom*, 18 and *The Politics of Education*, 55. For Dewey, see *Pedagogy in Process: The Letters to Guinea-Bissau*, 123 and *Pedagogy of Indignation*, 110.

⁴⁸⁸ In a dialogue at the University of Mexico, Freire named Antonio Gramsci and Frantz Fanon along with Albert Memmi and Lev Vygotsky as thinkers he was unknowingly “influenced” by. Freire and Horton, *We Make the Road by Walking*.

Christians and Marxists, though they may disagree with me in part or in whole, will continue reading to the end.”⁴⁸⁹ Once, when Freire was asked about the “great educators” and “great philosophers” who influenced his work and thought, the first person he spoke of was Christ, whom he regarded as “a simple educator” who gives “fantastic testimony” of his conception of history and education.⁴⁹⁰ Although Freire admitted to never feeling fully comfortable discussing his faith, he always readily acknowledged the influence of Christianity.⁴⁹¹ For him, to be Christian was to seek to struggle on behalf of the oppressed.

As Freire’s thought spread, the number of his influences and interlocuters grew, and his theory continued to evolve. Freire often noted, for example, how his encounters with North American feminists made him ensure that his subsequent work was more inclusive of women and also more explicitly attentive to questions of racial and ethnic diversity.⁴⁹² But the most consequential encounter Freire had with North America and the interlocutor that most influenced the trajectory of his reception was scholar Henry A. Giroux. It was with Giroux that Freire went on to found the field of critical pedagogy.⁴⁹³

⁴⁸⁹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 30th Anniversary Edition* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2014), 37.

⁴⁹⁰ Paulo Freire, Ana Maria Araújo Freire, and Walter de Oliveira, *Pedagogy of Solidarity* (Routledge, 2016), 60.

⁴⁹¹“I do not feel very comfortable speaking about my faith. At least, I do not feel as comfortable as I do when speaking about my political choice, my Utopia, and my pedagogical dreams. I do want to mention, however, the fundamental importance of my faith in my struggle for overcoming an oppressive reality and for building a less ugly society, one that is less evil and more human.” (Pedagogy of the Heart, 104).

⁴⁹² Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope*, 65.

As Giroux wrote in his introduction to Freire's *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation*, Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* appeared when radical education scholars were developing critiques of formal education as sites for the reproduction of capitalist ideology.⁴⁹⁴ These critiques tended to give the impression that schools could only ever serve the dominant order and therefore offered no hope for those seeking social change. What Freire did, in Giroux's words, was to combine the "language of critique" with the "language of possibility," thereby showing that there is always hope.⁴⁹⁵ Against a more fatalistic view, critical pedagogy suggests that the proper approach to teaching can result in an education that challenges rather than perpetuates structures of domination. While Freire never advocated the total erasure of the distinction between teacher and student, he stressed the importance of a democratic, dialogic approach to education that takes seriously the student's already-existing knowledge and experiences.⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹³ S. Macrine, *Critical Pedagogy in Uncertain Times: Hope and Possibilities* (Springer, 2009), 6. As Sheila L. Macrine notes, other "first-generation Freirian scholars" include Antonia Darder, Peter McLaren, Joe Kincheloe, Michael Apple, Jean Anyon, Maxine Greene, Paula Allman, Stanley Aronowitz, bell hooks, Ira Shor, and Shirley R. Steinberg.

⁴⁹⁴ See, for example, Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society* (1971) and Bowles and Gintis' *Schooling in Capitalist American* (1976).

⁴⁹⁵ Freire, *The Politics of Education*, xii.

⁴⁹⁶ Freire's commitment to dialogue is evident in the extent to which he used the format in his scholarship. Freire produced several "talking books" based on recordings of conversations with interlocutors, often with third parties present. He also published letters and contributed to edited volumes set up as dialogues with him. See *A Pedagogy of Liberation, Literacy: Reading the Word & the World, We Make the Road by Walking, Pedagogy in Process: The Letters to Guinea-Bissau, Letters to Cristina and Mentoring the Mentor*.

As Clarissa Hayward, one of the few political theorists to draw on Freire notes, critical pedagogy tends to take a “faced view of power,” meaning that it always sees power as the tool of specific actors (i.e. teachers) and fails to recognize the ways in which power operates “in boundaries to social action that no actor ‘has’ or ‘uses.’”⁴⁹⁷ In other words, it tends to assume that with the proper method, powerful teachers can “empower” students.⁴⁹⁸ Hayward goes on to critique critical pedagogy for its limited account of power and for its failure to appreciate the strategic ways in which teachers are forced to adopt seemingly disempowering pedagogies. As I will show, however, Freire never advocated the simplistic idea of powerful teachers empowering students. He rejected the one-directional view that the faced view of power model endorses and he further worried about its implications. As Freire once said to his collaborator Ira Shor:

It is interesting to me how people in the United States are so preoccupied in using this word and concept 'empowerment.' There is some reason in this, some meaning to it. My fear in using the expression 'empowerment' is that some people may think that such a practice simply empowers the students, and then everything is finished, our work is done, over! I wish I could better express the feeling deep inside me about this desire to use the word 'empowerment'.⁴⁹⁹

As I read him, what essentially drew Freire’s discomfort with the language of empowerment in association with his thought was that it missed the political point. It took what is really a theory of radical political action and turned it into a toothless teaching technique that offers, at best, empty critiques. As I will demonstrate, Freire was

⁴⁹⁷ Clarissa Rile Hayward, *De-Facing Power* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3.

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁹⁹ Ira Shor and Paulo Freire, *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1987), 108.

a deeply dialectical thinker who denounced both “verbalism” and “activism” in favor of a “praxis” that would be both active and theoretical.

Freire never sought to “empower” individual students to succeed in the status quo, and the way in which Freire is often narrowly invoked as an advocate for mere dialogue and “giving voice” in the classroom is especially irritating to his translator and collaborator, Donaldo Macedo. In his forward to *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to those Who Teach*, Macedo censures those “pseudocritical” educators who “invoke a romantic pedagogical model that isolates lived experiences as a process of coming to voice” and thereby “reduce their pedagogy to a form of middle-class narcissism.”⁵⁰⁰ He accuses them of using Freire’s dialogic method to provide students with a “group-therapy space for stating their grievances” and the teacher with a “safe pedagogical zone to deal with his or her class guilt.”⁵⁰¹ What Macedo fails to stress is that the root of their mistake is not so much a misapplication of Freire’s methods as it is a failure appreciate Freire’s larger political philosophy. As his closest readers well know, while Freire certainly had much to say about classroom spaces, his view of teaching and learning in schools was only a part of a much broader political theory of power, justice, social change, human nature, and freedom.

In his own time, Freire was also frustrated by bad readings of his work and critiques that he perceived to be unfair. He often attributed these to a lack of reading,

⁵⁰⁰ Paulo Freire, *Teachers As Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach With New Commentary by Peter McLaren, Joe L. Kincheloe, and Shirley Steinberg Expanded Edition* (Avalon Publishing, 2005), vii–viii.

⁵⁰¹ Freire, vii–viii.

lamenting that he was either known only for *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* or second-hand through the work and criticism of others.⁵⁰² At first glance, Freire's frustration may appear puzzling given that he so often claimed that he had no desire to "be transplanted" and that the best way to follow him was to reinvent him.⁵⁰³ Reflecting on *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire wrote, "For me, whatever universality there is in [it] derives from the vigor and force of its locales. I had no pretensions or dreams of developing a universal theory with this book."⁵⁰⁴ Freire was always adamant that context is paramount and that theory and practice must always inform one another. But while he never endorsed a universal application of his pedagogic theory, he and those closest to him were clearly unhappy with how some chose to "reinvent" him.

Was Freire being hypocritical or dishonest in calling for reinvention while insisting on a right way to be read? I maintain that this apparent disconnect is explained by the fact that while Freire does not advocate a universal teaching *method*, he does aspire to something universal, in so far as he offers a political theory. Any reading of Freire that adopts his practice without his political thought is almost surely a misreading, and their "domestication" of Freire stands in sharp contrast to those who censored him

⁵⁰² See *Mentoring the Mentor*, where Freire wrote, "It seems to me that many educators who claim to be Freirian are only referring to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which was published almost thirty years ago, as if that is the first and last work that I wrote," 310. See also *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 76.

⁵⁰³ Paulo Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom* (Penguin, 1972), 4. There is something reminiscent of Rousseau in Freire's insistence on being reinvented. Just as Rousseau insisted that Emile's education was not really a method that could be applied to any child, Freire denies offering a universal method that applies to all.

⁵⁰⁴ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 190.

precisely because they read him as a dangerous political theorist.⁵⁰⁵ If educators wish to “correctly” adapt and implement his methods, they must have a proper appreciation of his political theory.

Against Socialization

A study of Freire’s body of work reveals that *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in part a response to Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*, contains the seeds of the larger political philosophy that should guide any reading and practice of Freire. While the text grew out of his particular experience running and developing literacy programs for the rural poor of Brazil, it reveals a generalizable critique of traditional teaching methods and of a key portion of his intended audience: the segment of the intellectual left that presumes itself to be the liberators of the lower classes.⁵⁰⁶ Far more skeptical of formal schooling than Dewey, Freire came to occupy a position on schooling somewhere between the pragmatist progressive and his Marxist critics. Rejecting both transmission and socialization, he advanced a new theory of education as inquiry toward political activism.

Freire insisted that existing educational practice served a politics of domination and oppression. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he critiqued what he called “banking” models of education, which he described as follows: “In the banking concept of

⁵⁰⁵ Prior to the 1974 Carnation Revolution in Portugal, the fascist Portuguese government censured *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, calling it “a book of political theory, and experiment in the *mentalização* [mentalization, an attempt to instill a particular mentality, to brainwash] of the people with a view to inciting a social revolution” (*Pedagogy of Hope*, 234).

⁵⁰⁶ *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is dedicated to the oppressed and “*aos que neles se descobrem e, assim descobrindo-se, com eles sofrem, mas, sobretudo, com eles lutam*” (to those who in them discover themselves, and in so discovering themselves, suffer with them, but, above all, fight with them). Freire, *Pedagogia do Oprimido*.

education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing.”⁵⁰⁷ This model, Freire thought, is popular not only with oppressors seeking to dominate the oppressed, but also with their would-be liberators. Freire sought to prevent the hypocritical adoption of the banking model by those who claimed to fight oppression.

In rejecting traditional approaches to education where students are treated like empty containers that teachers must fill with “deposits” of their knowledge, Freire was very much in line with Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey. His critique of “banking education,” for example, was very similar to Dewey’s critique of the “monastery education” model that treats students like “a phonographic disc upon which certain impressions were made by the teacher, so that when the disc was put on the machine and the movement started (which, again, would be during the examination period), it might reveal what had been inscribed upon it.”⁵⁰⁸ But while Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey largely dismissed education as transmission, they did not explicitly emphasize its oppressive quality and the politics of it in the way that Freire did. Moreover, unlike their dismissal of transmission in favor of socialization, Freire’s rejection of education’s “narration sickness” was based more on its effectiveness than its ineffectiveness.⁵⁰⁹

⁵⁰⁷ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 72. Although the banking metaphor is most closely associated with Freire, in other work he also referred to the model as a “nutritionist” one where knowledge is food and “the word must be brought to [students] to save them from ‘hunger’ and ‘thirst’ (Freire, *The Politics of Education*, 45).

⁵⁰⁸ John Dewey and Professor Emeritus Sidney Ratner, “Monastery, Bargain Counter, or Laboratory in Education?,” in *The Later Works of John Dewey, Volume 6, 1925 - 1953: 1931-1932, Essays, Reviews, and Miscellany*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, 1st edition (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 109.

⁵⁰⁹ Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope*, 71.

Freire scorned the banking model not only because it falsely “regards men as adaptable, manageable beings,” but because of the indirect, yet real and detrimental effects he thought it had on society.⁵¹⁰ He revealed that the widely-accepted model of education as transmission can serve as a powerful myth that socializes the uneducated to defer to authority in part by rewarding students for their passivity. In other words, Freire highlighted that one’s beliefs about education—including the attitudes around education as transmission—can themselves be part of socialization. As it is usually practiced, education as transmission tends to socialize people to be passive and uncritical.

Crucially, it is not transmission or narration itself that was the problem for Freire, but the attitudes and beliefs that usually underlie its use. While many assume Freire was simply rejecting the lecture as a teaching method, as he later clarified, this is not the case: “It is also important to say that by criticizing banking education we have to recognize that not all kinds of lecturing is banking education. You can still be very critical while lecturing.”⁵¹¹ The content of the lecture as well as the manner in which it is presented mattered to Freire. If the lecture is being given as a “deposit” the listener must simply accept, then it is contributing to problematic socialization. But the lecture may also be a means of posing a problem for students to critique, investigate, and discuss rather than simply absorb.

Having critiqued transmission, Freire turned his attention not to getting socialization right in the way that Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey did, but to making the

⁵¹⁰ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 73.

⁵¹¹ Shor and Freire, *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, 40.

critique of socialization the center of a “true” political education. Freire thought the goal of education as socialization was necessarily the “adapted person” who is “better ‘fit’ for the world.”⁵¹² To socialize people for society is to educate them in the interest of those in power. Such an education only really helps those who benefit from the existing political system. As Freire put it in *The Politics of Education*:

Generally speaking, the good student is not one who is restless or intractable, or one who reveals one’s doubts or wants to know the reason behind facts, or one who breaks with reestablished models, or one who denounces a mediocre bureaucracy, or one who refuses to be an object. To the contrary, the so-called good student is one who repeats, who renounces critical thinking, who adjusts to models.⁵¹³

For Freire, education as socialization works hand-in-hand with domination. When the oppressed are educated, it is in order to adapt to their domination. Those who fail to adapt are treated as deviations and as the “pathology of the healthy society” that is assumed just.⁵¹⁴ This is convenient for those invested in the status quo: Rather than fundamentally change the system, they use schooling to change children into adults who will accept it. Such a critique applies even to Dewey, who simply stressed a less oppressive and more democratic ideal of a well-adjusted adult.

For Freire, it is a universal truth that all education is inherently political. Freire was very clear that “education worldwide is political by nature,” and that in “metaphysical terms,” “politics is the soul of education” everywhere.⁵¹⁵ This is true at

⁵¹² Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 77.

⁵¹³ Freire, *The Politics of Education*, 117.

⁵¹⁴ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 74.

⁵¹⁵ Freire, *The Politics of Education*, 188.

every level and at every age. For Freire, education always involves “directives,” “objectives,” and “dreams,” and these make it impossible for education to escape its “policity.”⁵¹⁶ The question for Freire is never whether education should serve politics, but how. As he was fond of repeating, “The question before us is to know what type of politics it is, in favor of what and of whom, and against what and for whom it is realized.”⁵¹⁷ Importantly, the politics of education is not merely a question of its content or goals, but of the manner in which it is carried out, as the pedagogic practice itself is always political too.

At times Freire sounded very similar to those on the left who challenged Dewey’s hopeful and optimistic vision of social reform through schooling. Like those who, against Dewey, suggested that schools could only ever perpetuate the dominant ideology of a given society, Freire maintained, “It is not education that molds society to certain standards, but society that forms itself by its own standards and molds education to conform with those values that sustain it.”⁵¹⁸ Whereas Dewey appeared to give more power and autonomy to education, Freire argued that even the very meaning of intellectualism is determined by those in power.⁵¹⁹ Generally speaking, schooling offers

⁵¹⁶ Freire, *Pedagogy for the City*, 23.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid*, 23.

⁵¹⁸ Freire, *The Politics of Education*, 170.

⁵¹⁹ Paulo Freire and Donaldo Pereira Macedo, *Literacy: Reading the Word & the World* (Bergin & Garvey Publishers, 1987), 122.

“an efficient mechanism for social control,” and so formal education could never be the driver of real change, much less revolution.⁵²⁰

But in the end, Freire’s critique of traditional schooling never led him to join the ranks of his friend Ivan Illich, whose *Deschooling Society* was published shortly after *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.⁵²¹ While thinkers like Illich asserted that formal schooling inevitably reproduced bourgeois ideology and capitalism, Freire dismissed this view of the school as totalizing and mechanical.⁵²² As he wrote in *Literacy: Reading and Writing the World*, “Education, it is true, reproduces the dominant ideology, but this is not the only thing it does.”⁵²³ First, it was important to distinguish between “systematic education” and “educational projects.”⁵²⁴ And while the first was always ultimately controlled by elites, the second could be used to subvert them. It was important, then, not to conflate education with schooling and thereby dismiss its promise prematurely.

Second, Freire was convinced that there are always conflicting “subsystems” and relationships that produce tensions in the world. Reality is not made up of static and mechanical relationships, but of contradictory and dynamic ones. These “contradictions” in society “penetrate the intimacy of the pedagogical institutions in which systematic

⁵²⁰ Freire, *The Politics of Education*, 116.

⁵²¹ “In my point of view the question for us today is not to abolish the schools. I never agreed with Ivan Illich, a great friend of mine” (*Pedagogy of Solidarity*, 47).

⁵²² For Marxist critiques of schooling, see also Bowles and Gintis’ *Schooling in Capitalist America*.

⁵²³ Freire and Macedo, *Literacy*, 39.

⁵²⁴ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 54.

education is working and alter its a role or its replicating work of the dominant ideology.”⁵²⁵ This means that even within schools, there would always be spaces of resistance and questioning students. Traditional schools might treat students like passive receptacles, but that did not make them necessarily so in fact.

As Freire clarified, he did not think that schools “really create subjectivity,” even though they might “repress the development of subjectivity” by, for example, repressing originality.⁵²⁶ Freire therefore diverged from the more pessimistic view which said that nothing could be done with schooling until after the desired revolution had arrived. For those who believed schooling could do nothing more than replicate the dominant ideology, there were only two options: Either one should aim to abandon the school altogether, or one’s favored ideology had to come to power in order to make any use of schooling. But Freire insisted that education is “a permanent process” that precedes, accompanies, and follows any political organizing or social change.⁵²⁷ Education was not a panacea, but it was always an integral part of the solution.

Therefore, one certainly needed to think outside of schools, but that did not render the abolition of schools necessary or desirable. The formal education of the school should work together with—not be replaced by—the kind of education that happens in organizing and social movements. Freire certainly recognized the educative potential of

⁵²⁵ Freire and Macedo, *Literacy*, 39.

⁵²⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁵²⁷ Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change* (Temple University Press, 1990), 119.

sites like workplaces and unions, but he maintained that schools were also promising sites of education for political change.

For Freire, we are conditioned by institutions but not determined by them. He fully appreciated the power of education as socialization, but he argued that authentic education would have to mean confronting and combatting this power, not attempting to destroy or coopt it. The desirable outcome was neither a world without schools nor one in which his preferred leftist government simply took them over and used the schools to socialize students and transmit new ideas. Rather, Freire claimed that a truly revolutionary education would mean becoming conscious of the shaping effects of culture and society, interrogating them, and realizing one's ability to shape them in turn. This realization had to manifest as political action. As much as Freire rejected the "mechanistic comprehension of history" presupposed by those who viewed persons as the mere products of institutions, he also rejected the "subjective idealism" inherent in the opposite view which thought that changing minds was enough to change the world.⁵²⁸ For this reason, he viewed schools as a necessary but insufficient condition for social and political change.⁵²⁹

Freire ultimately sided closer to Dewey, then, in deeming schools necessary for society as well as social change. At the same time, he insisted that schools would never be at the forefront of a revolution, a fact which did not worry Dewey, as he was more interested in reform. The most liberating education, Freire thought, could "only be put

⁵²⁸ Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom*.

⁵²⁹ Dewey and McDermott, "Education and Social Change," 414.

into practice outside the ordinary system” because the ruling elites would always control the schools and never allow them to be an instrument of their demise.⁵³⁰ If for Dewey the school could act as a kind of rational arbiter working intentionally in the name of progress, for Freire any kind of scientism, even in the name of progress, should be rejected. Whereas Dewey sought harmonization and generally deemphasized power and contestation, Freire found the most hope in contradiction and struggle.

What Freire ultimately wanted was a liberatory education for and with those oppressed by a given society. Such an education would both investigate the causes of oppression and spur concrete political action that would “reinvent” rather than simply “take” power.⁵³¹ Again, education was fundamentally political for Freire, but that did not mean that it should simply be weaponized by the party in charge. A real revolution, he thought, demanded a truly revolutionary education with a practice and politics consistent with it. One could not be radically democratic only to embrace an authoritarian conception of education.

Successfully implementing and achieving such an education would depend on the context at hand, but there would always be some common features. First, a Freirian education would have to be with the oppressed, meaning that the oppressed would have to participate in their own liberation in order for it to be truly liberating. No one could ever free another through education. As Freire put it, the oppressed must “contribute to the midwifery of their liberating pedagogy.”⁵³² This meant that the student would have to

⁵³⁰ Freire, *The Politics of Education*, 25.

⁵³¹ *Ibid.*, 179.

be respected as a knowing student-teacher and the instructor would have to understand themselves as a learning teacher-student. Together, through a process of joint inquiry and dialogue, they would arrive at a new understanding.

Second, a Freirian education would always be grounded in real content, meaning that Freire rejected the idea that one could teach a politically neutral kind of “critical thinking” as though it were a kind of technical skill. One doesn’t simply learn to be critical, but to be critical about a concrete reality and in a way that is necessarily political. Freire further mandated that the content should be tied directly to the student’s experience of the world and never understood as a “gift” from the teacher.

Finally, a Freirian education would always contain a moment of action. Especially as Freire’s thought developed, he was adamant that critiques and consciousness-raising were insufficient. While education should change how the oppressed see themselves and their reality, this was not separate from or a mere pre-cursor to political action for Freire. Like Dewey, Freire insisted on both thought and action. For Freire, every practice presumes a theory and every theory urges a practice, and each implicates the other. “True” education requires both reflection as well as action.

The idea is to begin with the student’s real-world experience and self-understanding in order to interrogate it and challenge it through dialogue. While the teacher must respect the knowledge of the student, they are not to defer to it entirely, in part because dominant ideologies might be affecting the student’s thought. Because oppression is often internalized, oppressed students must recognize themselves as the “hosts” of their oppressor, who like a demon must be exorcised in order for the “mutual

⁵³² Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 48.

humanization” of both the oppressor and the oppressed to become possible. Having achieved greater clarity, they are able to proceed to the second moment of education: political action.

In practice, Freire’s adult literacy programs involved the formation of “culture circles” in peasant communities. First, a team of coordinators would conduct extensive research about the area and the everyday life of the peasants they would be teaching. Rather than rely on prepackaged lesson plans, they would design the content for the course around their observations. This way, the content of the lessons was always based on the actual day-to-day experience of the learner. The students would be presented with everyday scenes, and these would generate the words that would themselves become themes for discussion. As part of becoming literate, then, the learners would also be discussing their everyday life. Through these discussions, the students would dive into the “why” of things, namely the systemic reasons behind their status quo.

Freire recounted how initially, many of the peasants accepted the stories told about themselves by their oppressors. Many also rationalized the status quo as the will of God. Oftentimes, they would be very engaged in the conversation, only to abruptly chastise themselves and say, “Excuse us, we ought to keep quiet and let you talk. You are the one who knows, we don’t know anything.”⁵³³ Through continued discussions and challenges offered by the teachers, however, the peasants came to a new understanding if not of their oppression, then of the reasons for it and their capacity for political action.

⁵³³ Ibid., 63.

As Freire described it, in becoming literate, his students not only learned to read words but to reread the world; they not only learned to write words but to see themselves as authors of the world. That is, they gained a sense of agency and a new understanding of culture as human action upon the world. Culture was no longer some privileged knowledge or something above them and out of reach. Culture was something they already had and that they could shape by acting in and on the given, natural world. As crucial as this new understanding was, it was only the first step in a “permanent” revolution. Once started, the work of education would never be finished.

Education as Mutual Humanization

For Freire, the work of education could never be finished because human beings are both always unfinished and aware of their incompleteness. Educability itself is “grounded in the radical unfinishedness of the human condition and in our consciousness of this unfinished state.”⁵³⁴ Unlike animals, who are also unfinished, human beings can be conscious of their unfinished nature, causing them to constantly seek to become more than they are and thereby changing their relationship to the world. To be fully human for Freire is to be aware of ourselves as unfinished beings in a “permanent relationship” with an unfinished, “historical-cultural” world: Humans both “transform the world and undergo the effects of their transformation.”⁵³⁵ The heart of Freire’s political theory of education is not democratic classrooms filled with dialogue or consciousness-raising, but

⁵³⁴ Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom*.

⁵³⁵ Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (Seabury Press, 1973), 157. See also Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 84.

a belief in education as the embodiment of the attempt to become more human through what we might call “world-self” transformation. Put another way, education is the means by which people become more political beings and therefore more human.

According to Freire, “True education incarnates the permanent search of people together with others for their becoming more fully human in the world in which they exist.”⁵³⁶ “True” education insists on both the capacity of human beings to transform the world and the role of the world in transforming humans. This is why Freire argued that education could never simply be a mechanism for reproduction any more than it could fundamentally change the world through ideas and critique alone. Freire could not accept any theory of education that viewed the relationships between the student and the world or the student and the teacher as one-directional.⁵³⁷ Authentic education, for Freire, validates the unfinished quality of both humans and the world as well as their relationship to each other. In doing this, it is also liberatory: freedom is “the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion.”⁵³⁸ Without freedom, there can be no humanization.

Freire thought that to lose a sense of one’s capacity to act on the world is to lose not only freedom but the defining quality of being human. All humans, but especially “the people,” have a calling to become more human, but this “vocation” can suffer a “distortion” in history, leading to “dehumanization.”⁵³⁹ This distortion is the hallmark of

⁵³⁶ Ibid., 144.

⁵³⁷ Ibid., 144.

⁵³⁸ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 47.

⁵³⁹ Ibid., 43–44.

oppression, which Freire defines as “any situation in which ‘A’ objectively exploits ‘B’ or hinders his and her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person.”⁵⁴⁰ Oppression makes impotence seem normal, even fated. When humanity is “taken” in this way, it harms both the people it was taken from as well as those who took it. The remedy Freire offered is a political-educational project of “mutual humanization” that confirms human agency and sustains the struggle toward a new world free of the oppression, alienation, and meaninglessness that cause and characterize dehumanization.

Because the goal of education is to enable students to become more fully human and because for Freire to be human is to see oneself as an author in the world, true education will not see the student as the product of a teacher’s efforts but as an agent capable of self-world transformation. True education will not train people in skills, but help students “assume the true role incumbent upon them as people [...] the role of being Subjects in the transformation of the world.”⁵⁴¹ Again, this should lead students to both question their reality *and* inspire them to change it. In his earlier work, Freire named this process “conscientização,” but finding it frequently misinterpreted, he abandoned it after 1987.⁵⁴²

The consciousness Freire described demands a new understanding of history and one’s role in it. As Freire described it, there are three different types of consciousness:

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., 55.

⁵⁴¹ Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, 110.

⁵⁴² “Naturally, I never abandoned the comprehension of the process which I had called conscientization, but I gave up the word,” Miguel Escobar et al., *Paulo Freire on Higher Education: A Dialogue at the National University of Mexico* (SUNY Press, 1994), 46.

naïve, critical, and magical.⁵⁴³ While the first leads people to think the world is fully in their control, the latter leads people to think they have no recourse but to adapt to it. Only *critical* consciousness correctly perceives the dialectical relationship between the self and the world. Despite the implications of his earliest works, Freire did not maintain that *conscientização* is the linear movement of individuals through discrete stages. As both Peter Roberts and Antonia Darder have stressed in their scholarship on Freire, the relationship between these types of consciousness is overlapping and dialectical.⁵⁴⁴ This tendency to think of *conscientização* as a process of moving through stages was one of many misunderstandings that led Freire to abandon the term.

Correctly understood, *conscientização* is a collective, social process, not one of gradual, individual enlightenment. One does not arrive at a completed state of critical consciousness, rather, it is an ongoing process that is always unfinished and always demands engagement with the world and others. Critical consciousness cannot be achieved alone, nor can it be given to a student by teacher. Rather, it is the result of a mutual process between teachers and students. Although the teacher respects the knowledge of the student and begins with it, they must not idealize it. As he described it in his letters to Guinea-Bissau, this means “returning to them, in an organized form, what they have themselves offered in a disorganized form.”⁵⁴⁵ The teacher helps the

⁵⁴³ Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, 44.

⁵⁴⁴ See Roberts, *Education, Literacy, and Humanization: Exploring the Work of Paulo Freire* and Darder, “Conscientização” in *Critical Pedagogy in Uncertain Times: Hope and Possibilities*.

⁵⁴⁵ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy in Process: The Letters to Guinea-Bissau* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 24–25.

student make sense of their knowledge and experience with the world in a deeper way, helping them to be more critical of their reality. Distinguishable from persuasion, manipulation, and propaganda, education as humanization can only occur through dialogue that interrogates how knowledge relates to the world, thereby exposing how the world might be transformed.

As I have already stressed, the point of a Freirian education is not merely to emphasize dialogue or give voice to the oppressed, but to generate a rereading and a rewriting of the world. This is clear not only in Freire's work in Brazil, but through his work in post-colonial Africa as well. In Guinea-Bissau, where the challenge was to totally remake the school system against the model left by the colonizers and suitable to the new society, Freire suggested restructuring education around key themes like "rice" and offering a truly comprehensive education. Instead of simply learning about rice production, for example, students would learn about history, politics, health, and geography through this common and relevant theme. As with Freire's approach to literacy education in Brazil, the students would never learn only technical skills, but always be gaining a deeper understanding of their reality and their capacity to transform it through their education.

Because *conscientização* is always grounded in social and material conditions, one cannot simply be or become "critically conscious" without reference to *and* immersion within a concrete reality. That is, in calling for critical thought, Freire was not calling for a mental capacity devoid of content or for a distanced, intellectual critique of the world. Freire dismissed the claims of teachers who say they teach students "how to

think” because one must always be thinking about some concrete thing.⁵⁴⁶ As Freire insisted, “In so far as this type of education is reduced to methods and techniques by which students and educators look at social reality—when they do look at it—only to describe it, this education becomes as domesticating as any other.”⁵⁴⁷ To divorce critical thought from content or action in this way is to “mythologize” and depoliticize it.⁵⁴⁸ Against this understanding of critical thought, *conscientização* is a political-educational process both grounded in reality and always tied to action. It understands that consciousness is neither capable of changing reality on its own nor a “mere reflection of reality.”⁵⁴⁹ Rather, it emerges from the endless interplay of these tensions. Put another way, *conscientização* involves “constant clarification of what remains hidden within us while we move about in the world” and is therefore “as permanent as any real revolution.”⁵⁵⁰ It is always ongoing as new thought demands new action which demands new thought which demands new action.

Freire’s model of education as humanization held that we are most human when we are self-consciously engaged in political action. To be human is to not only be aware of one’s unfinished nature in an unfinished world, but to seek to become “more” through self-world understanding and transformation. Therefore, Freire’s political-educational

⁵⁴⁶ Horton and Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking*, 172.

⁵⁴⁷ Freire, *The Politics of Education*, 125.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 124–25.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

goal was not to organize and mobilize oppressed classes by enlightening them with knowing teachers, but to remind them of their humanity so that they might participate in the never-ending struggle to create a new and better world. Freire's hope was that his model of education would allow the oppressed to liberate themselves, not by imitating or becoming their oppressors, but by creating a new world that affirmed the freedom and humanity of all. Only through the creation of something truly new could today's revolutionaries avoid becoming tomorrow's oppressors.

Dialogics toward Liberation

Instead of focusing on institutions, Freire's model of education as humanization centered the teacher as a political agent. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire presumed an unjust order by default sustained by teachers who were most likely from the oppressor class. He contended that those who wish to teach the oppressed must understand that they themselves are in need of liberation and that only their students can liberate them both: "Only the power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both."⁵⁵¹ Any attempt to defer to that weakness will most likely result in a "false generosity" that feeds itself on the status quo rather than a "true generosity" that turns "supplicating" hands into "human hands which work and, working, transform the world."⁵⁵² In order to truly join the oppressed, the teacher must be reborn and adopt a new pedagogy.

⁵⁵¹ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 44.

⁵⁵² *Ibid.*, 45.

Freire aligned the ideal teacher with the ideal revolutionary leader who emerges from the contradiction between the dominant and the dominated in society. Both must identify themselves with the oppressed and engage in a process of mutual humanization with them. To truly educate is to make students see the world and themselves more clearly so that they can transform both. This means that as radicals, Freirian educators must have a “correct” view of history and reality as ever-changing and in constant need of reassessment. Critical and creative, they can never see the world as fixed because they understand the “dialectical unity” of subjectivity and objectivity.⁵⁵³ This differentiates them from “rightist sectarians” who “attempt to domesticate the present so that (he or she hopes) the future will reproduce this domesticated present” as well as “leftist sectarians” who “consider the future pre-established [as] a kind of inevitable fate, fortune, or destiny.”⁵⁵⁴ While sectarians insist on the truths they construct, the radical embraces uncertainty and knows that history is made *with* the people, not for them or in spite of them. Radical educators must always be prepared to relearn what they think they know, and for this reason, Freire saw no dichotomy between teaching and research.⁵⁵⁵

As has already been made clear, Freire’s educator cannot simply transmit knowledge or “liberate” students. Open to the possibility of his or her own transformation, the Freirian teacher must first join the oppressed by undergoing a quasi-

⁵⁵³ Ibid., 38.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid., 48.

⁵⁵⁵ In *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, Freire expresses frustration at those who draw sharp distinctions between teaching, learning, and researching. “Producing knowledge” and “knowing knowledge” should be understood as “two moments in the cycle of knowing,” and teaching is an act of “reknowing” and therefore a form of research (10).

religious death and resurrection.⁵⁵⁶ They must completely renounce the oppressor class to enter in communion with their pupils. This means engaging in constant self-criticism and self-examination, and above all, trusting their students, the people. The teacher must be patient, humble, hopeful, and secure in the knowledge that true education is both a cooperative activity and political one. It is always a process of mutual shaping: Teachers do not form students and students do not form themselves, but each participates in the process through dialogue. Educators must be willing to listen to their students and engage in meaningful discussion with them.

Although there is something Socratic in Freire's stress on inquiry and dialogue, he never associated himself with Socrates and only made reference to him in order to distance himself. On Freire's reading, Plato understood dialogue as a way of remembering what was already known, whereas for Freire, "For dialogue to be a method of true knowledge, the knowing subjects must approach reality scientifically in order to seek the dialectical connections which explain the form of reality."⁵⁵⁷ The Freirian teacher is not a Socrates but a "cultural worker" who possesses several qualities, including "humility," "lovingness," "courage," "tolerance," "decisiveness," "security,"

⁵⁵⁶ In *The Politics of Education*, Freire writes, "Such a process implies a real renunciation of miss that are dear to them: the myth of their superiority, of their purity of soul, of their virtues, their wisdom, the myth that they save the poor, the myth of the neutrality of the church, theology, education, science, technology, the myth of their own impartiality" (123).

⁵⁵⁷ See Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom*, 18 and *The Politics of Education*, 55.

“verbal parsimony,” and “the joy of living.”⁵⁵⁸ Unlike Socrates’ questioning, Freire’s inquiry must always be linked to social action and transformation.⁵⁵⁹

While Freire called for a more democratic relationship between the teacher and the student, he always insisted on their distinction. Freire dismissed the notion that teachers should be mere facilitators, asserting that the educator must maintain authority without ever becoming authoritarian.⁵⁶⁰ For Freire, there is a difference between imposing and proposing.⁵⁶¹ If teachers were to abdicate their directive role, he thought, students could never know freedom, which can only be developed in relation to authority.⁵⁶² That is, Freire insisted that freedom cannot exist without limits, and so the teacher must provide the authority needed to enable the student’s freedom to be realized. Teachers must therefore avoid anything like indifference or what he termed “laissez-faire education,” and instead be an “active and curious presence” without overshadowing the students.⁵⁶³ Freire dismissed progressive models of education that allowed students to simply play or learn whatever they wanted, as though the teacher were only a neutral midwife and had nothing to offer the student.

⁵⁵⁸ Freire, *Teachers As Cultural Workers*, 71.

⁵⁵⁹ Paulo Freire and Antonio Faundez, *Learning to Question: A Pedagogy of Liberation* (Continuum, 1989), 38.

⁵⁶⁰ Horton and Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking*, 157.

⁵⁶¹ Freire and Faundez, *Learning to Question*, 34.

⁵⁶² Horton and Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking*, 61.

⁵⁶³ Freire and Macedo, *Literacy*, 140.

In Freire's view, the directive teacher sees their role as a "politician" and has a clear understanding of themselves politically.⁵⁶⁴ They should therefore be clear and open about their politics and encourage students to challenge their position. Freire rejected the idea that the teacher could ever transcend their time or place, which was yet another reason why he was so dismayed at the tendency to reduce him to a methodology. According to him, teaching should never be viewed as a science or a set of universal techniques, but as a self-consciously political and localized act. The teacher who does not know their politics risks becoming a "bureaucratized" follower engaged in meaningless day-to-day activity.⁵⁶⁵

Therefore, the teacher must always know in whose interest they educate, and this interest must be specific. No teacher can be for "everyone and anything" or for "vague phrases" like "people" or "humanity."⁵⁶⁶ For Freire, neutrality is a "colorless, tasteless thing," "a comfortable and perhaps hypocritical way of avoiding any choice or even hiding [one's] fear of denouncing injustice."⁵⁶⁷ Teachers must have concrete political dreams and be in touch with their political goals, and they cannot be afraid to criticize the dreams of their students. As Freire once said to Ira Shor:

We must say to the students how we think and why. My role is not to be silent. I have to convince students of my dreams but not conquer them for my own plans. Even if students have the right to bad dreams, I have the right to say their dreams are bad, reactionary or capitalist or authoritarian."⁵⁶⁸

⁵⁶⁴ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the City* (Continuum, 1993), 45.

⁵⁶⁵ Freire, *Pedagogy in Process*, 12–13.

⁵⁶⁶ Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom*.

⁵⁶⁷ Freire.

Freire thought teachers must, with openness and with the knowledge that they themselves are always unfinished, attempt to convince students of what they think is just. To do otherwise is to be like a Pontius Pilate amidst oppression.⁵⁶⁹

Inquiry as Politics

Freire thought teachers must reveal their politics, but he also thought that they have a responsibility to inform students of other positions. Somewhat surprisingly, he stressed the importance of intellectual diversity, particularly in his later writings. Institutionally, Freire thought that the university needed both progressives and reactionaries and that a university with just one or the other type would be a “disaster” since:

What youths need is precisely the testimony of the difference and the right to discuss the difference. This is what should happen. How beautiful it is for the students who finished listening to a progressive teacher speaking about utopia, criticizing, for example, a neoliberal discourse, which is spreading now the terrible ideology of fatalism around the world, [and then] to listen, after that teacher leaves, to another teacher defending the neoliberal thought.⁵⁷⁰

But although Freire spoke about the importance of ideological diversity in the university, he offered no explanation of how to guarantee that students would be exposed to that diversity instead of simply choosing classes with the teachers and students whose reputations align with their preconceptions. Freire wrongly assumed that the teacher who pronounces themselves a politician hasn't already undercut their ability to make a real

⁵⁶⁸ Shor and Freire, *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, 157.

⁵⁶⁹ Freire and Macedo, *Literacy*, 139.

⁵⁷⁰ Freire, Freire, and Oliveira, *Pedagogy of Solidarity*, 23.

connection with all of their students and already closed off the possibility of the kind of learning Freire said he wanted. Such a teacher might sooner see a classroom either filled with students that already agree with him or her, or, if the students cannot choose their teacher, a classroom with alienated students who know they have no real hope of changing their teacher's mind.

Freire further assumed that a teacher can only have one message to all students. He could not account for the teacher who can take the time to defer their "dreams" and their politics in order to help students better understand their own at an individual level. Freire may have been correct in pointing out that who to teach, what to teach about, and even how to teach is always political, but that does not mean that the goals of the teaching must always be explicitly political and seeking to form students as a group to think and act in one direction. For Freire, the teacher must always be the steward of becoming and can never be one who inspires, models, or guides a student's search for truth apart from politics.

Freire made these assumptions because he could not accept those who claimed to be apolitical or politically neutral, associating them with those who supported the technocratic view of education supported by neoliberalism. Later in life, Freire was especially dismayed by the growing consensus that education could be a neutral instrument for empowering students to succeed without revolt. He thought his peers too willing to submit to global capitalism and to abandon education's revolutionary potential. For Freire, education is a solution to social, political, and economic problems in so far as it works to dismantle and resist those structures and institutions that are at the root of those problems. But for most, Freire realized, education was seen as a solution in a

different way: Everything from economic disadvantage to social division is caused not by existing institutions, but by a lack of education, and so what is needed is simply more and better education, not systemic, political change.

More and more, Freire thought, people were more interested in using education to help individual students succeed in a rotten system. While he understood the pragmatism behind the position that what people need is food and not philosophy, he insisted that they could have both. Like Dewey, Freire thought that technical training could and never should be merely technical. In learning how to do a job, one could also learn about the history and politics of that job. Rather than concede that education was better off empowering individuals to succeed, Freire never abandoned the idea that it should empower classes to remake the system altogether. He saw individualistic notions of freedom as false and limited, and he maintained that the liberation of any one student only matters in so far as it contributes to social liberation.

Like Dewey, Freire insisted on the inherently social and political character of education. He rejected solitary contemplation as well as any idea of education as truth seeking for its own sake. Freire insisted that truth and knowledge are never neutral; that this is a lie told by those in power. For Freire, education is always for the sake of something and someone; it always either serves those in power or works against them. There is something irresponsible if not unethical about trying to pry education away from politics. To educate or not to educate is itself a political choice, what to teach and study is also a political choice, and the results of educational activity have political consequences. Freire argued that this was the case for every subject, be it history, science, math or reading. By choosing not to teach math using problems that force students to confront

economic injustice, for example, teachers were making a political choice that helped support injustice. Education is inescapably political, regardless of the level or age of the persons involved and regardless of their conscious awareness of the politics involved.

Freire denied that education could ever offer an escape from its plicity. He believed that anyone who claims to learn for the sake of learning truth is simply hiding their politics, which are complicit in the existing power structure and its injustices. Like Dewey, Freire assumed that social and political change can always be directed for the better, and that the only meaningful life is a social and political one. But what if, for some people, fulfillment is found in the quiet moments—however fleeting—that one can stand apart from the world in contemplation of something beyond politics and beyond the immediate concerns of becoming?

Freire could not appreciate the value of understanding or solitude untethered to action. Even as a writer, Freire claimed to never write for pleasure but because he felt “politically committed” and wanted to persuade.⁵⁷¹ For Freire, solitude only obviated the need for sociality and had to be overcome.⁵⁷² For him, “full humanity” cannot be achieved “in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity.”⁵⁷³ At sixty-two, Freire spoke of how he felt his “incompleteness” within himself at every level,

⁵⁷¹ Freire, *Letters to Cristina*, 133.

⁵⁷² Paulo Freire and Ana Maria Araújo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Heart* (Continuum, 1997), 29.

⁵⁷³ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 84.

an incompleteness that pushed him “constantly, curiously, and lovingly toward other people in the world, searching for solidarity and transcendence of solitude.”⁵⁷⁴

As with Dewey, education was always about becoming for Freire. Although both shared a democratic commitment that made them deeply uncomfortable with any authoritarian or paternalistic view of education as subject formation, Freire’s theory is fundamentally tied to self and world formation. Putting aside the fact that he does have a human “product” of education in mind (the critically conscious radical), Freire grounded education in the human need to “become” ideal, completely ignoring the need to simply “be” in truth as an equally human one. Ultimately, Freire rejected the desire to understand, accept, or find peace in what *is* without trying to control what *will be*, deeming a state of constant, endless struggle as the only defensible one.

Although in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire appears to allow room for “profound meditation” as a state “in which men only apparently leave the world, withdrawing from it in order to consider it in its totality, and thus remaining with it.”⁵⁷⁵ But this “retreat” is not “authentic” if it “signifies contempt from the world and flight from it.”⁵⁷⁶ According to Freire, a person seeking refuge from the world in this way—perhaps a Rousseau of *The Reveries*, for example—was a political illiterate, characterized by the inclination to “escape [and reject] concrete reality [...] by losing himself or herself in abstract visions of the world.”⁵⁷⁷ Freire associated this desire with an inability to

⁵⁷⁴ Freire, *The Politics of Education*, 197–98.

⁵⁷⁵ Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope*, 88.

⁵⁷⁶ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 88.

⁵⁷⁷ Freire, *The Politics of Education*, 103.

comprehend that reality is never fixed, that transformation is always possible, and that the human, permanent search for completion is always necessarily a social one. Freire insisted that an “I” could never stand on its own, that it must always be an immediate and historical “We” to have meaning.

In the end, Freire could only understand the desire to dream alone as an act of pessimistic resignation or of profound selfishness and greed. In *The Politics of Education*, Freire associated solitude and withdrawal with moving through life on a kind of autopilot with no sense of the “dramatic meaning” of one’s existence.⁵⁷⁸ He maintained that the only way to avoid this “empty intellectualism,” which is “alienating” and pessimistic was through social action, as though living constantly outside oneself in communion with others isn’t its own kind of automatic mode.⁵⁷⁹ Later, in *Pedagogy of the Heart*, Freire claimed that those who seek solace in being by themselves “selfishly require that everything revolves around them so as to meet their needs” and “can only see themselves, their class, or their group due to their greed, which suffocates the rights of others.”⁵⁸⁰ Even in his criticism he was only capable of understanding the solitary person in social terms.

Naturally, Freire despised the very idea of an “ivory tower,” insisting that all “authentic” thought is both rooted in the world and only possible in “communication.”⁵⁸¹

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid., 129.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid., 129.

⁵⁸⁰ Freire and Freire, *Pedagogy of the Heart*, 30.

⁵⁸¹ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 77.

Freire mocked the idea of the university as a “temple of pure knowledge” that must “soar above earthly preoccupations.”⁵⁸² He condemned those who “want a humanistic education” at the same time that they want to “maintain the social reality in which many people find themselves dehumanized.”⁵⁸³ It didn’t matter to Freire whether or how such an ideal reality could ever be possible, only that one is always actively engaged in transforming the world.

Freire calls into question whether any educational institution ever could or should put politics aside. He failed to see that while all people may be political, that is not the only quality that makes one human, and the choice to put politics before and above all else, the choice to see and experience life always through the lens of politics, is exactly that: a choice. It is not, as Freire would have all people believe, a necessary one. Against Freire, one could imagine an individual who wishes to study the world without an agenda to change it; who wishes to immerse themselves in a world apart from everyday politics: a world of numbers, of nature, of other times or places, of ideas that transcend their moment. Imagining a community of such individuals is more difficult: Such a place is certainly not in the obvious interest of society to support, and it’s not clear how such an institution could sustain itself. Freire often thought that his political-educational agenda would have to be pursued in the margins; perhaps it is the same for solitary dreamers, thinkers, writers, and questioners as well.

⁵⁸² Freire, *The Politics of Education*, 118.

⁵⁸³ *Ibid.*, 119.

VI

Living to Learn: An Alternative

On April 21, 1934, *The Saturday Evening Post* published its hundred and fiftieth cover image by Norman Rockwell. The image depicts a child crowned with a laurel wreath. Wearing a white toga and golden sandals, the boy holds a heavy red tome under his right arm and a wooden torch with a wooden flame in his left hand. Behind him, a woman leans forward in her chair. With her right hand on his right shoulder, she positions a sash across his body. Next to them, a wooden crate balances a sewing box, spools of thread, pin cushions, and cloth. The woman does not stoop down to dress him; she tenderly wills him into the future. The hope and pride on her face is comically checked by the dread over his. While her enthusiastic grin expresses hope, the boy's frown conveys a mixture of annoyance, puzzlement, fear, and determination. The prominent gold lettering on his sash completes and captions the illustration. It reads: "The Spirit of Education."

Rockwell's painting is open to interpretation: Does the image simply reflect the honest mix of emotions that students will inevitably have about their educations? Or are the boy's feelings about learning a problem to be fixed, perhaps with a new curriculum or new methods? Is the boy appropriately dressed to fulfill his duty to carry on tradition, to guard and pass the torch of knowledge he has received? Or is he being forced into the irrelevant clothing of the past when he could and should be dressed and ready for a new future?

In this dissertation, I have called attention to a different question, asking not what the boy should wear or how he should look, but what it means for the spirit of education

to be staked on the figure of a child. I have suggested that while conservatives and progressives may disagree on the proper content, methods, and attitudes one should bring to education, they share an understanding about the meaning of their fight: Their disagreement is ultimately about the kind of adult they want education to produce and, in turn, the kind of society they want to produce. They are an older generation projecting its dreams onto a younger generation.

Through the work of Plato, Rousseau, Dewey, and Freire, I have shown how political thinkers have long looked to education as a tool for managing individual and collective projects of becoming. In this final chapter, I assess their arguments in light of current conversations around civic education. Even as I urge a rethinking of what effective education for subject formation should look like, I insist that education is not synonymous with formation. Although education can be pursued out of a desire to shape and control the future, I maintain that education has another root: the desire to know *why* and *how* and *what if*, even if that knowledge serves no purpose. Understood in this way, education is neither a possession nor a means to becoming a better self or society; it is a practice. It is the activity of pursuing truth and understanding for its own sake. Against narrow and elitist conceptions of the pursuit of truth, I defend and illustrate this alternative spirit of education.

Rethinking Civic Education

I began this dissertation by arguing that education is primarily understood as a means for realizing individual and collective projects of becoming and not for participating in the activity of truth seeking as such. I further theorized that there are three

modes of learning: transmission, socialization, and inquiry. Next, I showed how Plato, Rousseau, Dewey, and Freire, all of whom made education central to their political theories, also shared this conception of education as a mechanism for forming ideal selves and societies. I further demonstrated how, against the view that good citizenship can be inculcated in youth through instruction, each thinker called attention to the power of socialization and the subconscious ways in which citizens are formed.

In chapters two and three, I revealed how both Plato and Rousseau believed that laws, institutions, and cultures can generate good citizenship in ways that direct instruction cannot. In other words, they argued that the ideal learning mode for shaping citizens is socialization, not transmission. They further agreed that by this logic, education as socialization is only as “good” as the society in question—the wrong laws, weak institutions, and a culture of bad citizenship will inevitably prevent the formation of good citizens. Both thinkers found their own societies to be deeply flawed: Plato implied that Athenian society, not Socrates, was to blame for the corruption of its youth, and Rousseau thought Parisian society increasingly incompatible with good citizenship. Each theorized new laws and institutions that would form the right civic habits, and both attacked their contemporary cultures, advocating censorship or reform.

Rousseau went further. Having judged the corruption of society and the development of individuality to be facts of modernity that were fundamentally at odds with the kind of virtuous citizenship that demands subsuming the self to the whole, he experimented with reimagining private education to counteract the effects of socialization. Although he imagined raising a child away from society, his method still relied on the mode of education as socialization, and so rather than use direct teachings to

form an ideal adult, Rousseau focused on curating the child's environment and limiting his social influences. His model set a new standard for education: the creation of a good and authentic individual whose virtue is in his self-sufficiency and relative independence from civil society. Rational, fair, and generous, Rousseau's ideally-formed adult would not seek to dominate others or compete with them, nor would he be controlled by their opinions.

In chapter four, I detailed how Rousseau's break from Plato would prove especially generative for Dewey, whose work has offered the most sustained account of the role of education in American democracy. Following Hegel, Dewey maintained that educators need not choose between prioritizing the individual or society in education because each can be perfected through the other. Analyzing his conception of education as growth, I showed how Dewey rethought the school as a site of socialization. Rejecting the traditional model in which teachers transmit information to passive students, he insisted that the school could instead serve as a controlled and ideal setting for learning through association with others. He further imagined that the school could not only educate young students but serve as the guiding center of social and political life for its community.

In chapter five, I introduced Paulo Freire and showed how he also rejected education as transmission. Denouncing the traditional school and its "banking" model of teaching and learning, Freire sought to redefine education as a collective praxis that prompts critical consciousness and radical political action. For Freire, true education was always found in association with others, but rather than theorize how children might be socialized toward his ideal from youth, he considered how adults could become critics of

their socialization and work to transform its terms through political action. Freire made education as inquiry central to his vision of individual and collective becoming, turning not only outward but also inward-directed inquiry into a political and moral virtue. Like Dewey, he not only saw education as an instrument of becoming, but as becoming itself.

Despite their differences, each thinker agreed that citizens are formed less through lessons learned and more through their experience or interpretation of everyday social and civic life. The implication that even the school-focused Dewey recognized was that the key to ideal individuals and societies was not in deliberate instruction but in the cultures and other institutions that educate children and adults. If true, this means that praise, blame, and hope for the adult “outcomes” of education cannot be squarely placed on teachers or curriculum. Whatever power a school has to form persons competes with many other associations and institutions, including families and churches as well as the media and the internet. The laws, norms, and traditions of communities all play a role in guiding and forming the beliefs and behaviors of citizens. And, because socialization is always ongoing, it is important to keep in mind that one is always becoming throughout life: Whatever influence the classroom may have, it can be unlearned and forgotten outside of school or in the years that follow it. People will always be more than what their formal and formative educations intend.

Although the importance of knowledge and skills cannot be discounted, “ideal” citizenship requires “ideal” socialization which requires attention to law, culture, and institutions. Although for many contemporary thinkers the school is seen as the key instrument for affecting change in these areas, their attention may be misdirected. As Peter Levine argues in *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: The Promise of*

Civic Renewal in America, “We must prepare citizens for politics, but also improve politics for citizens.”⁵⁸⁴ This realization appears to have informed the approach taken in the recent report by the national and bipartisan Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship convened by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In “Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century,” rather than stress how schools must be reformed to promote citizenship, the Tocquevillian-inspired authors count schools as just one of many institutions where civic virtue is fostered, a list that includes “libraries, houses of worship, parks, businesses, sports teams, fan clubs, [and] philanthropic organizations” as well as “museums and performance spaces.”⁵⁸⁵ These are institutions that do not *create* citizens so much as enable and encourage the ongoing practice of good habits of citizenship. Critically, the vast majority of their recommendations are not directed at shaping youth for a better future, but at impacting the lives of adults. Investing in “civic educators and civic education” is just one of thirty-one recommendations, and rather than emphasize youth, the authors stress the need for “lifelong (K–12 and adult) civic-learning experiences with the full community in mind.”⁵⁸⁶

None of this is to suggest that schooling and teachable knowledge is unimportant or unnecessary for citizenship and for democratic citizenship in particular. The content of

⁵⁸⁴ Peter Levine, *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: The Promise of Civic Renewal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2013), xiv.

⁵⁸⁵ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2020), 16, www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose.

⁵⁸⁶ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 9.

school curricula does matter, but the rhetoric around schools today often takes them to be all-powerful sites of brainwashing or oppression, as though students have no agency and no influences outside the walls of their classrooms. Admittedly, students do spend many hours in school. Compelled into them for their own good, children are told what to learn and when and with whom and how until they are deemed “educated” enough to leave. But whatever number of hours are spent in school, the classroom is never totalizing in its influence. This is obvious but often ignored because the school is one of the few places in a liberal democratic society where it is acceptable to speak of intentionally shaping other persons towards an ideal. That is, in America, families cannot be told how to educate their kids, but public schools can be told what to teach. The underlying hope is that through the school the process of becoming can be democratically contained, directed, and controlled through a planned curriculum.

This hope in the power of a planned curriculum has resulted in an educational landscape where much is staked on the content of education, as though the only real learning that happens in schools is that which is measurable and testable. Vast amounts of time and resources are spent on forcing children to prove that education as transmission has been successful, despite the fact that what is learned for an exam in the short term offers no proof of what will be remembered years or even days later. Students are ranked, sorted, and afforded privileges based on their performance on these tests to the point that their self-worth is confused with these metrics, often leading to overinvestment or total disengagement with formal education.⁵⁸⁷

⁵⁸⁷ Frank Bruni, *Where You Go Is Not Who You'll Be: An Antidote to the College Admissions Mania* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2015).

This is a natural reaction for students who sense that their becoming—or at least their employment opportunities and social status—is staked on their schooling. To some extent, it is: As Michael Sandel argues in *The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good*, credentialism is “the last acceptable prejudice,” elevating those with credentials and demeaning the significant contributions of the uncredentialed to the common good.⁵⁸⁸ This occurs despite the fact that, as sociologist Randall Collins argues, degrees are more often not about job skills or the technological needs of society, but about “a type of currency of social respectability, which are traded in for access to jobs.”⁵⁸⁹ It is not just an overvaluation of credentials that feeds this, however: When education is only for becoming, and when becoming is understood as both progressive and developmental, the implication is that those with more education are in fact better and more developed. The underlying issue is not just that transmissible knowledge and credentials are taken to be the whole of education, but that education is understood only in terms of becoming, and that both education and becoming are confused with schooling.

Unfortunately, the only major alternative to those who overemphasize content and curriculum in schools are those who stress “critical thinking” and other content-neutral skills. Critical thinking is mistakenly compared to the kind of knowledge one learns through transmission, as though one simply enters school not knowing how to think and

⁵⁸⁸ See Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*. For other critiques of the meritocratic ideal in education and its impacts see also Nicholas Lemann’s *The Big Test* (2000) and Daniel Markovits’ *The Meritocracy Trap* (2020).

⁵⁸⁹ Randall Collins, *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification* (Columbia University Press, 2019), 1.

then magically leaves school knowing how to think. One does not become a critical thinker, but one can practice critical thinking. Teachers can and should help people practice their thinking by prompting, informing, and criticizing it, but this is not the same as “creating” critical thinkers. Schools and teachers do not create people, but they can teach knowledge and offer to help them practice and improve their skills, many of which can be lost without continued practice.

As I have been arguing, the same is true of democratic citizenship more broadly. To quote education scholar Gert Biesta, “individuals might have democratic knowledge, skills and dispositions, but it is only in action—which means action that is taken up by others in unpredictable and uncontrollable ways—that the individual can *be* a democratic subject.”⁵⁹⁰ Relatedly, to the extent that schools do form subjects, it is mainly through the active experiences of socialization that they provide. That is, school culture, not exam scores, will be most important for determining whether good citizenship is being fostered. At the level of higher education, this suggests that the education one experiences at a small and relatively isolated residential liberal arts college will be very different from the one received at a large, non-residential research university, even if the professors and curricula were the same.⁵⁹¹

⁵⁹⁰ Gert J. J. Biesta, *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future*, 1 edition (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2006), 135.

⁵⁹¹ As John Seery has suggested, such small residential liberal arts colleges might themselves be taken as models for civic life rather than a mere preparation for it. *America Goes to College: Political Theory for the Liberal Arts* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

At the same time, as Wilson Carey McWilliams noted, socialization has its limits, and “in the American tradition, this emphasis on malleability has often been exaggerated into a brief in the almost limitless power of ‘socialization.’”⁵⁹² Nevertheless, if the role education plays in subject formation is primarily a matter of socialization and social experience, then it is clear that, while curriculum does matter, more attention must be given to how schools are structured to actively work against the interests of good democratic citizenship. The majority of schools are not only undemocratic, valuing neither the equality, judgment, or liberty of their students, but tend to stress competition over cooperation. Students are rigidly divided into batches and expected to follow a strict timeline of learning and development, emerging by class year into society as though learning is always progressive and always correlated with age. Teachers are pressured to engage in social promotion and to pass students through the education system even when those students lack the basic skills they need to learn and engage with more advanced material.

And, rather than integrate children and young adults into the community, schools are designed to cordon off youth so that, with the exception of teachers, children and adolescents spend the majority of their days with others in their age group when they could be learning from and with others of all ages, especially the elderly. This has repercussions not only for the dominant civic culture fostered, but also for the way in which schools and education are understood and the role that they play in adult life. School is not a place where students of all ages can learn together and from one another

⁵⁹² Wilson Carey McWilliams, *Redeeming Democracy in America*, ed. Patrick J. Deneen and Susan J. McWilliams (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 99.

according to need and interest. Instead, it is more often treated as a place one must go through in order to reach adulthood and in order to meet an artificial demand for credentialism. Only later in life, if ever, do some adults come to miss and value the experience of education for its own sake.⁵⁹³ Unfortunately, by then, the school is no longer for them.

Above all, young students are encouraged to value learning content as a precondition for their becoming and for the extrinsic rewards it can deliver. Learning is treated as a necessity for passing a test, or for getting a job one day, or for getting into college which is itself a prerequisite for getting a job. Learning is presented as what is necessary for living and not as a goal of living itself, and schools position themselves as places that teach what everyone “needs” to know, despite the fact that this is an impossible task. As Dewey might argue, they hope to make students *learned* rather than offer guidance and practice in how to live a life of constant *learning*.

Beyond Becoming

Plato, Rousseau, Dewey, and Freire were all principally interested in education as the art of becoming, as a way to form the ideal subjects and societies they envisioned. But while today much if not most of education is pursued in the name of becoming a better self or a better society, there is, I suggest, an alternative. Best captured in the mode of education as inquiry, this idea of learning is not grounded in the desire to shape selves and remake the world, but in the desire to understand some truth about ourselves and the

⁵⁹³ Bryan Garsten, “The Big Questions,” *Yale Daily News*, Summer 2018.

world.⁵⁹⁴ While truth and becoming may certainly inform one another, there is an important distinction between them that the thinkers studied in this dissertation either grappled with or ignored.

As I have argued, Plato was acutely aware of the dangers of education for truth seeking and its delicate relationship to political order because he watched as the very inquiry made possible by democracy resulted in mutual destruction: Socrates' young followers turned on democracy and democracy turned on Socrates. This is why in the *Republic* Socrates famously suggests that only those proven selfless and devoted enough to the city should pursue inquiry. Inquiry could only be safe for society *and* saved from society, he thought, if it were kept in the hands of those who could be trusted enough to always put the public good first.

If Plato posited a world where inquiry would no longer be scorned or ridiculed but held in the highest position of privilege in society, by the time Rousseau wrote, inquiry was, in his view, exalted for all the wrong reasons. Trampling over moral truths and common sense, its institutionalization and proximity to power had corrupted both it and the people practicing it, people who were neither interested in the public good nor in understanding for its own sake, but in their vanity and social status. There was no need, he reasoned, to encourage this kind of education in either the people or the elite; those who had a true desire to seek truth would be called to it regardless and could act on it in

⁵⁹⁴ “Mystery moves us to seek education, just as education, rightly conducted, confronts us with mysteries.” Wilson Carey McWilliams, “Democracy and Mystery,” in *Redeeming Democracy in America*, ed. Patrick J. Deneen and Susan J. McWilliams (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 212.

private. Whereas Plato thought politics and inquiry would have to limit one another in order to save one another, Rousseau saw their marriage as mutually corrupting.

Against Rousseau's pessimism, Dewey and Freire both deemed inquiry essential to politics and especially to liberal democracy. For Rousseau, education as truth seeking found its purest form in solitude, but neither Dewey nor Freire could recognize the possibility of education as a private activity. For them, there was no such thing as education that did not ultimately serve the ends of becoming: The pursuit of truth was not an end in itself but a means for individuals and societies to become better versions of themselves. For Dewey, inquiry was fundamentally about solving problems; for Freire, it was about rereading and rewriting the world.

Inquiry's promises to fix and transform the world has made education more supported and widely available than ever before, but it has also meant that access to formal education is conditioned on the assumption that it will result in productive benefits to society. Education is celebrated in the United States, but on the condition that it serves the social, political, and economic order by resulting in tangible benefits. All educational activity is expected to justify itself in terms of its contribution to individual and collective projects of becoming, be it in the form of a gainfully employed adult or social progress.

One could argue that the fact that schools are required to justify themselves is not merely the result of their expense but a tacit acknowledgement of society's need to control and restrain inquiry even when it celebrates the human desire to understand and the impulse to question. The consequences of human curiosity are often unintended, unpredictable, and unwelcome—particularly when they are aimed at the very foundations

of justice or order. Ensuring that education has clear and measurable goals and outcomes is a way of restricting it and of holding teachers and students accountable. And often with good reason, the terms, ethics, and limits of inquiry are set and debated every day by governments, universities, foundations, and ethics boards.

But when the pursuit of education is forced to justify itself in terms of utility alone, there is a cost to the pursuit itself. To determine the moral, social, political, or economic end of education in advance is to presume to already know the proper content and bounds of education. Such limits can not only preclude the fortunate accidents that arise from truly open-ended inquiry, but direct it away from its first goal: truth. This is not to say that education should be pursued irresponsibly, but rather to assert that there is an important difference between accepting or acting on the personal, social, political, and economic implications of a discovered truth and allowing personal, social, political, and economic ends to determine the inquiry itself. The risk is that rather than invest based on truth, truth is manipulated to serve investments; rather than allow politics to follow from understanding, understanding is clouded by politics.

Education is undeniably a useful though not all-powerful tool for achieving personal, social, political, and economic goals. And whenever it costs money, and wherever its intrinsic value remains unfelt, it will be forced to justify itself. But while there is no question that education can contribute to individual and collective projects of becoming, as Michael Oakeshott wrote, “while an educational engagement is not designed to *produce* performers of ‘social’ functions (this is what is meant by saying it has no extrinsic ‘purpose’), neither is it designed to *produce* ‘socially’ valueless

persons.”⁵⁹⁵ The same is true of the knowledge it reveals. To insist that education must always aim at individual or social becoming in advance is to confuse the desire to understand with the desire to control; it is to confuse knowledge with power.

The Lifelong Learner

In conclusion, I offer an alternative portrait of the spirit of education. I ask what it would look like to pursue education not for the sake of a future self or for its perceived social, political, or economic utility, but for the pleasure and challenge of engaging in the activity of truth seeking itself. Addressing critiques, I argue that there is a satisfaction that comes from engaging in the challenge to understand that is separate from whatever use might result from it, and I illustrate how this experience of education can be recognized, valued, and cultivated in everyday life.

In this dissertation, I already offered two illustrations of what education for truth seeking as opposed to education for becoming might look like. The first was Socrates the student. Against common readings, I suggested that one should interpret Socrates as neither as a typical teacher nor as a model democratic citizen, but as a special kind of permanent student devoted to pursuing the truth long after his prime. Uninterested in shaping or forming others, Socrates the student wanted to understand himself and the world, asking questions not in order to instruct, but because he was called to a life of truth seeking. Socrates pursued truth in public and with others, but also in quiet, private moments of solitude. His activity was thought to be useless at best and dangerous at

⁵⁹⁵ Michael Oakshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning* (Liberty Fund, 1989), 79.

worst, and the city wanted Socrates to account for himself. Forced to justify his activities, he tried to explain his practice as a compulsion. Convicted, he went on to claim that he was performing a service for the city that merited compensation. Yet this service was hardly his primary motive: It was, after all, precisely the fact that he would not pay or be paid to deliver on a promise of education that distinguished him from the sophists.

The second model of education for truth seeking was Rousseau the solitary botanist. Resentful of his patrons and of all educational institutions, Rousseau knew well that education for compensation was also education at a price. Unlike the Rousseau who sought to educate and intervene in dominant culture, the solitary Rousseau was simply a man pursuing his desire to study nature. He wanted to study plants not to make new medicines or because he thought it would make him a better person, but because he wanted to understand plants.

These versions of Socrates and Rousseau are two models of education for truth seeking, but one need not look to philosophers, and here I offer a third: Gregor Johann Mendel. The intellectually curious son of two peasants, Mendel was born in Czechia in 1822 and decided to join an Augustinian abbey when he was twenty-one. The 14th century monastery he joined was a cold medieval building with one-room cells, but it also had a library with more than 10,000 books and a garden with an alley for solitary walks. As part of his preparation to become a priest, Mendel took classes at Brno's Theological College, where he studied theology, history, and the natural sciences. He was "disciplined, plodding, [and] deferential—a man of habits in habits," and his biggest offense was sometimes neglecting to wear his scholar's cap to class.⁵⁹⁶ In the summer of

1847, he was ordained, and by the next summer he was an exceptionally timid parish priest in Brno.

Failing in his job, Mendel decided he would try to teach at Znaim High School, and although he was selected, the school wanted him to obtain certification in the natural sciences. Mendel traveled twice to complete the exam which had a written and oral component. He took both and failed both spectacularly, and so the high school decided he would need more education at a proper university if he were to teach. Mendel studied at the University of Vienna for two years before returning to the abbey, and in 1853 he began working at the Brno Modern school as a substitute teacher. At the urging of those school administrators, he once again sought certification.

Six years had passed since Mendel had first failed his exams. Equipped with more schooling and more experience, he once again failed spectacularly, this time managing to argue with his botany examiner and not even finishing the three-day exam. Having given up on obtaining certification, Mendel resigned himself to substitute teaching. By then, he already had a garden of pea plants, and he also had a question: “If he crossed a tall plant, with a short one, would there be a plant of intermediate size? Would the two alleles—shortness and tallness—blend?”⁵⁹⁷

Mendel’s question was really about how traits are passed from one generation to the next. It was an old question whose answer had already been theorized, but Mendel set about trying to answer it anyway. At first, he secretly bred field mice in his room. When

⁵⁹⁶ Siddhartha Mukherjee, *The Gene: An Intimate History* (Simon and Schuster, 2016), 18.

⁵⁹⁷ Mukherjee, 49.

the abbot discovered this, Mendel moved his experiments outside and turned to pea plants instead. He spent eight years observing and breeding hybrid plants in his garden, working in solitude and recording results in his notebook. From 1857 to 1864, he spent his time with 28,000 plants, 40,000 flowers, and almost 400,000 seeds. The results of his inquiry were astonishing, and they contradicted everything that was believed about heredity at the time.

Mendel presented his findings to a group of about forty farmers, botanists, and biologists—the members of his local natural science society. The results were also published in the obscure *Proceedings of the Brno Natural Science Society*, and he requested forty copies so that he could send them to professional scientists. Mendel also wrote to Carl von Nägeli, a Swiss plant physiologist in Munich he respected and whose respect he hoped to earn. But from 1866 to 1900, Mendel’s paper was only cited four times. Although he had tried to share the truth he had learned, the gardener and amateur was emphatically ignored.

Nägeli did deign to reply to Mendel, and they corresponded, but Nägeli was cold, terse, and patronizing, someone who “could hardly be bothered with the progressively lunatic ramblings of a self-taught monk in Brno.”⁵⁹⁸ On his advice, Mendel spent years pursuing a dead end, trying to reproduce his results in hawkweed plants, which were of interest to Nägeli. What neither realized then was that these plants could reproduce asexually, and so Mendel’s experiments with them were destined to fail.

⁵⁹⁸ Mukherjee, 55.

Gregor Mendel, now known as the father of genetics, died of kidney failure in 1884 at the age of sixty-one. With his health suffering in the last few years of his life, he worked less and less, but he never gave up on his gardening. Incredibly, his studies and experiments were not even noted in his obituary, but a fellow monk did write, “Gentle, free-handed, and kindly... Flowers he loved.”⁵⁹⁹ Mendel loved his garden and loved the pursuit of truth even though he had no followers, no recognition, and no reason to expect that anything would come of his studies. Like Socrates wandering the streets of his city and Rousseau wandering the woods, Mendel was neither young, wealthy, nor in school as he pursued truth. He was a man in his garden guided not by a social, political, or economic agenda, but by his own desire to understand.

A perfect contrast to Mendel is found in another man who was born in the same year. A child prodigy and Charles Darwin’s cousin, Francis Galton also wanted to understand heredity. But unlike the biologists who were excited to pursue the vast array of questions opened up by Mendel’s inquiry after it was rediscovered nearly forty years later, Galton was less interested in how genetics worked and more interested in how they could be applied. Galton, the father of eugenics and the man who gave us the phrase “nature vs. nurture,” was not interested in truth seeking but rather in becoming; he was not interested in knowledge itself but in how that knowledge could be used to create perfect individuals and societies.⁶⁰⁰

⁵⁹⁹ Ibid., 55.

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid., 67.

Today, Americans tend to believe the following: that education is principally for youth and for those trying to better themselves, that education should be pursued only with a greater, extrinsic purpose, and that “real” education only happens in schools where it can be directed and certified. In short, that education is for becoming and that schools are to be the instruments of that becoming. But the portraits I offer of Socrates, Rousseau, and Mendel are case studies that suggest just the opposite. Education need not be centered on youth or self-improvement; education need not be pursued with a purpose beyond the desire to understand; and “real” education does not require schools.

This does not negate the fact that institutional support for the pursuit of truth is important and necessary. In fact, as Stanley Fish insists, rather than aim to shape students into moral or civic ideals, teachers can try to guide and introduce students to the pleasure of the activity of education itself.⁶⁰¹ And rather than try to be “a machine for achieving particular purpose or producing a particular result,” as Oakeshott wrote, schools can be sites for supporting and embracing truth seeking as “a manner of human activity.”⁶⁰²

Rather, the point is that the pleasure of the pursuit of truth is neither relegated to institutions nor the exclusive province of those who attend them. To take science as an example, while doing cutting-edge research demands more institutional resources than ever before, cutting-edge science is not the only reason to do science. First, at the individual level, a discovery is always new. Second, newness or usefulness is not the only measure of the value of an inquiry. More importantly, science can be done in the

⁶⁰¹ Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁶⁰² Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, 96.

everyday, by any child or adult curious enough to ask why, how, and what if. Formal training in the scientific method may help one do better science, but humans have been observing the world and devising experiments to understand it long before the practice was standardized. Relatedly, there is no question that sufficient time and space to think or write alone is a privilege. And yet, one need not be a well-funded genius, much less a schooled one, to think and wonder about the world. One need not even be literate; recall that Socrates never wrote anything down.

The mistake of those who both promote and reject truth seeking on the grounds of its elitism and intellectualism is that they forget that education is an activity and not a permanent state of being. One can certainly lead a life that seeks to maximize the amount of time spent learning and pursuing the truth, but, as Aristotle reflected, a life spent in total contemplation is not for the human.⁶⁰³ The world is not neatly divided into truth seekers and the rest, but this is the flawed assumption of scholars like Allan Bloom who conclude that the number of truth seekers is necessarily very small and who stress the necessity of the proper teachers and models.⁶⁰⁴

Like many advocates of the humanities, Bloom also caricatures modern science and glorifies the truth seeking of a particular and relatively closed community in the humanities. But just because the modern scientific search for truth is easier to justify in instrumental terms and follows a different method does not mean that all modern scientific searches are necessarily instrumental or even all that different in spirit from

⁶⁰³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald, 1 edition (New Jersey: Pearson, 1999), X.

⁶⁰⁴ Allan Bloom, *Closing of the American Mind* (Simon & Schuster, 1988).

humanistic ones. Science and the modern research ideal may stress “new” truths over “old” ones and present themselves as creators of new knowledge, but to discover is really to uncover what is already there. Education for truth seeking in all disciplines can be an activity of working and wondering to understand for its own sake. Moreover, as Michael Crawford reminds us, even working on a motorcycle or building something can be a deeply contemplative, truth seeking, and educational activity.⁶⁰⁵ There are many ways of truth seeking and many questions worth pursuing, and reading old books with teachers as guides is only one of them.

Furthermore, one’s capacity for wonder and desire to understand oneself and the world is not necessarily determined by one’s work, income, or status in society. Barring severe cognitive challenges, inquiry is accessible to everyone even if not everyone has the same amount of time to devote to it. The professionalization of education may have led to a devaluation of self-education, but self-education is always possible and ongoing. Serious inquiry is conducted in conversations with friends, in places of worship, in jails, and in the quiet moments before sleep. Ultimately, whether or not education occurs in the spirit of truth seeking or becoming cannot really be known by anyone except those engaged in the activity itself.

That said, it may be true that today it is increasingly difficult to maintain a taste for the kind of education I am advocating. The search for truth is sometimes futile, and understanding is never guaranteed. Especially in a world where finding quick answers is easier than ever before, the pleasure of truly discovering an answer for yourself is neither

⁶⁰⁵ Matthew B. Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work* (Penguin, 2009).

necessary nor efficient, and continuing the search requires a patience and persistence that can be difficult to maintain. With answers to any question available at our fingertips, one can spend less time than ever in a state of wonder about the unknown, instead knowing just enough to be dangerously overconfident in how much one knows. And in a world of constant interaction, reachability, and distraction, the moments of solitude that might spark the deepest reflections are ever more rare and ever less valued. Nevertheless, as I have suggested, the true spirit of education is everywhere. It waits for anyone willing to wonder enough to find it.

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