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An Aristotelian Approach to Making Education Contribute to Democratic Utopia

For as long as people have been thinking about utopia, they have been thinking about the role education plays in achieving the ideal society. No matter how one conceives of utopia, it seems obvious that to realize it, one must ensure members of society have certain knowledge, skills, and values. A well-designed education system can do exactly this. This idea is already present in Plato, perhaps the original utopian thinker in the Western tradition, who devoted a significant amount of attention to how his philosopher kings, the leaders of his perfect society, are to be educated (Plato).

Democrats have a very different conception of utopia. Unlike Plato, they do not believe that society should be run by a highly competent and well-trained elite. Rather, they subscribe to the ideal of popular participation in government, by free and equal citizens who come together to overcome their differences and reach shared conclusions about how they want to shape their societies. This ideal places very high demands on education. It requires the entire population to be educated for democracy, as all citizens are expected to participate in the governing process. For this reason, many democratic theorists have written about how education should be designed to teach democratic virtues, including John Dewey (Dewey, 1923), Martha Nussbaum

(Nussbaum, 1998, 2010), and Amy Gutmann (Gutmann, 1999), as well as the present author (Dekker, 2023).

However, in thinking about how education can prepare citizens for a perfect democracy, one must face a fundamental tension between education *for* democracy and education *as* democracy. On the one hand, it would seem obvious that an education that aims to prepare young people for participation in the democratic process should itself be democratic. If the goal of education is to teach students to participate in shaping their societies as free and equal citizens, education should also be based on freedom and equality, at least in some areas. For, if students are not allowed to exercise democratic skills in their education, how can they develop them for later use? Hence, an authoritarian education, in which students are completely subjected to their teachers and simply do as they are told, could never adequately prepare them for their future role as citizens. Rather, students should be allowed to actively shape and participate in all aspects of their education, whether it be through student-centred pedagogies, curricula with freedom of choice, or being heavily involved in the management of their programs and institutions. In short, if one wishes to educate students for democracy, education itself should be organized as a democracy.

On the other hand, it is also obvious that education itself is not a democracy. It is not based on freedom and equality, but is an inherently hierarchical enterprise. Teachers are simply more knowledgeable than their students. That is why they are teachers, and why they are in charge of the educational process, designing the curriculum and grading their students. Indeed, if students and teachers were equal, there would be no point in students attending education in the first place. Nor should students be completely free in their education, as they are not yet able to make good use of this freedom. They lack knowledge, experience, and understanding of their values, as well as the likely consequences of their choices. Allowing them to do whatever they might want would result in many bad choices being made. Hence, they must be guided for their own good, and there must be rules in place to structure their education. It would go too far to consider making education democratic the equivalent of putting the lunatics in charge of the asylum, but it is

undeniable that there are fundamental differences between students and teachers, both in terms of their development and their roles in the educational process, and that this should be considered in designing an educational system. As a result, teaching students to become good citizens cannot be achieved by turning schools and universities into mini democracies.

This tension is a challenge for all educators, who must navigate a path between involving students in their education, giving them freedom of choice and allowing them to participate in its design, and telling them what to do as well as judging how well they have done. However, this tension is not unique to thinking about democratic education. It is inherent in any sophisticated conception of democracy itself. Because democracy is only rarely understood as a pure democracy in which the people directly rule without constraint. Rather, democracy is a complex set of institutions, which all have different roles and interact in particular ways to realize the ideals of democracy. This conception of democracy finds its origin in the work of the ancient philosopher Aristotle considering it can help educators find a proper balance between treating their students as equals and insisting on hierarchy in education.

ARISTOTLE'S CONSTITUTIONAL GOVERNMENT

In his *Politics*, Aristotle discusses many different political regimes and considers their institutional dynamics. While on some level, the text is descriptive rather than utopian, seeking to empirically describe the different regimes, it is the foundation of a widespread understanding of how democracy is supposed to work. In particular, Aristotle's conception of constitutional government offers a normative ideal of democratic governance. At the base of constitutional government lies Aristotle's conception of justice, which holds that insofar as people are equal, they should be treated equally, but insofar as they are unequal, they should be treated unequally (Aristotle, book 3, chapter 9). This is a response to Plato's observation that some people are simply more able and more virtuous than others, and that, to have a good government,

the best citizens should be put in charge of society (Plato, book 3). After all, the work of the government is complex. It can only be done by the most skilled and qualified members of society. To allow unqualified people to participate in the process is folly, and hence democracy is undesirable.

Aristotle does not deny that some individuals are more skilled than others. So, in terms of instrumental competence, there are inequalities between people, and this means that they should be treated differently. However, in other respects, individuals are more or less equal. For example, in their ability to judge whether the government is performing well, all citizens can form a meaningful opinion, rather like those who cannot cook at the highest level can nevertheless judge the quality of the food prepared by leading chefs. Moreover, in certain fundamental questions of governance, if one aggregates the wisdom of all citizens, the quality of their collective judgment might equal or even surpass that of experts, even though each individual citizen is not nearly as qualified. Hence a system of government should allow for the participation of all citizens as equals in these domains (Aristotle, book 3, chapter 11).

As a result, a constitutional government allows for rule by qualified experts, treating people as unequal where they are unequal, but makes these experts accountable to all citizens and provides them with input from the people on a range of fundamental issues, respecting equality where citizens are equal. This is effectively the ideal of a modern polyarchy, in which governments are accountable to elected, representative parliaments and in which citizens can participate in social debates through freedom of expression, freedom of association, and a free press (Dahl, 1999).

Such a utopian constitutional government can become corrupt in two ways. It can either become an oligarchic regime, in which the experts mistakenly think that, because they are unequal to others in some respects, notably their abilities, they are unequal in all respects and altogether better people. Hence, they do not consider the input of all citizens, to the detriment of the regime. To prevent this kind of corruption, the elites must respect the people and appreciate the contribution they can make to good governance. A constitutional government may

also degenerate into populist mob rule, in which the people mistakenly believe that, because they are equal in some respects, they are equal in all respects, including governing competence. From this, it is concluded that experts are not required, and so they are dispensed with, with negative consequences for the quality of government. As such, in a democratic utopia, citizens have an appropriate respect for the value of expertise in the governing process (Aristotle, book 5, chapter 1).

ARISTOTELIAN DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

Aristotle's ideal of the constitutional government can help in understanding the difficulty of providing appropriate education for democracy. As he himself stipulates, to reach this utopia, political education should educate citizens in the spirit of the constitution (Aristotle, book 7). If the spirit of the constitutional government is based on treating those who are equal as equals and those who are unequal as unequals, then democratic education should also be based on this principle. For, in some respects, students and teachers are all equal, even though in other respects they are not. Hence, a properly democratic educational system should involve students in some areas, but not in others.[1]

This analysis can explain why authoritarian education is inappropriate for preparing future citizens for democracy. An educational system which is directed solely by teachers, without any student input, is akin to an oligarchy. It is based on the mistaken assumption that educators are unequal to students in all respects, and hence that students have no role to play in the governance of their education. Conversely, it is also clear that an educational environment without any distinctions between teachers and students, and in which students have as much say as teachers, would be similarly undesirable. This is because it would

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[1] It is of course true that there are differences and similarities among students as well, with some students being better than others in some respects, but not in all. This raises interesting questions about the extent to which higher education should be differentiated, offering different programs for different groups of students. This thought will not be pursued here, but for a discussion of these matters, see Dekker (2020).

be based on the idea that students and teachers are equal in all respects and should be treated as equals in all matters. This, too, would be a mistake.

The question now becomes in what respects students and teachers are equal, and in what respects they are unequal, as this generates their respective roles in educational contexts. It seems obvious that, generally speaking, teachers and educators are unequal to students in terms of their knowledge of academic disciplines. Moreover, they probably have a better knowledge of different pedagogical methods and the psychology of learning, as well as the legal and organizational framework in which education operates. This is because of their advanced training in these fields and their professional experience. Their greater life experience also means that they are likely to have a better understanding of the future context in which students will have to function and the probable consequences of their choices. For example, they will probably have a better understanding of what knowledge and skills students will need in the labour market or what the consequences of taking certain courses, achieving certain grades, or undertaking particular extra-curricular activities might be.

However, teachers and students are also equal in a number of respects. For one thing, students are equal to teachers in their capacity for learning, at least as a group. Some teachers have more cognitive aptitude than some students, but some students have more cognitive aptitude than some teachers. Moreover, the inequalities are probably less pronounced in the domain of skills than they are in the domain of subject specific knowledge. Students are also equal in their ability to determine if a certain academic topic or pedagogical approach is interesting. Furthermore, they are as good as teachers in being able to determine if they are learning something and developing themselves, or if they understand what they are being taught. They also have a privileged insight into their talents, abilities, and what they want to achieve. As such, they are uniquely placed to determine what they want from their education. Moreover, while individual students might not be as experienced or informed as their teachers on some topics,

a dialogue with a large group of students might reveal insights that experts could not reach by themselves.

This is a rough analysis of how students and teachers are equal and unequal in educational matters, based on a common sense understanding rather than extensive empirical research. However, insofar as it rings true, it has implications for how educators should involve students in the design and management of their education. For one thing, teachers should never assume that their students are not as cognitively capable as they are. Perhaps they have enjoyed more education and have had a wider range of experiences, but, in this, they are merely further along a path that at least some students are just as capable of travelling. As such, educators must always be open to the possibility that students produce new insights or different perspectives that are just as valid as their own. They should give ample space for students to present their views, and while they should always judge these views critically, they should avoid judging students in the process.

Furthermore, educators should take a keen interest in how students are receiving what they are taught. This does not necessarily have to take the form of student-satisfaction questionnaires, as these provide little understanding of how students are perceiving their education and why they do so. Rather, teachers should engage in conversations with their students about how their education is going and how much they feel they are learning. Of course, it is then up to the teachers to decide how to implement this feedback in the context of other educational and academic requirements, but it would be wrong to dismiss the input of students out of hand, as the unwise judging the wise.

It is also important to allow students to make the choices about their education only they can make, whether it be about which educational programs they enrol in, the courses they want to take, the topics they would like to research, what extra-curricular activities they wish to undertake, and even how they spend their time. Of course, it is important to provide them with relevant information about the different options and the likely consequences of certain choices, or to stimulate them to reflect on those choices. Moreover, it is entirely legitimate for educators to impose certain requirements on students, for example in

terms of admissions criteria, prerequisites, and curricular sequences, based on their academic expertise. However, in the end, the choices students make in the context of those conditions are properly their own.

Lastly, educators should seek to engage their students in discussions about the educational environments they are responsible for. Fundamental choices about the kind of educational community they wish to be could be discussed profitably with students as a group, via communal discussions, assemblies, or representative councils. These conversations should be genuinely deliberative. Educators should be more concerned with learning from them than with seeking support for decisions they have already made or with preventing student protests. It goes without saying that this is a somewhat stylized representation of matters and that one should not think of these approaches to education as dichotomous, but rather as a continuum on which educators need to situate themselves, depending on to what extent they are equal or unequal to their students in particular respects.

FROM DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION TO DEMOCRACY

The measures discussed here are merely a sketch of how education can embody the key values of Aristotle's constitutional government. No doubt there are other ways in which this can be achieved. However, an educational environment that seeks to treat students and teachers as equals insofar as they are equal and as unequals insofar as they are unequal can teach students that this principle is also fundamental to the governance of a truly democratic society. As they take up their positions in that society, this might help them avoid the pathologies that can undermine it. If they end up becoming qualified experts with an active role in government, they might remember how their teachers respected the ways in which they could give input in their education, even though they were merely students. This may prevent them from believing that just because they are now more qualified than most in terms of their expertise, they are not more qualified in all regards, and lead them to respect the role all citizens should play in a constitutional

government. If they end up not being a part of the government, they might remember how, as students, they benefitted from the expertise of their teachers and appreciate the value of having highly qualified people in government. This might help them resist the temptation to believe that democracy can function without such experts. Of course, future citizens will need both attitudes at various points in their lives, as those governing will on some occasions be ruled, and those who are ruled will, on some occasions, govern. After all, a citizen in a democracy is both ruler and ruled. In this way, a proper understanding of democratic utopia ensures that education as democracy, properly understood, is also effective education for democracy.

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