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Aristotle's educational politics and the Aristotelian renaissance in philosophy of education

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This paper assesses the historical meaning and contemporary significance of Aristotle's educational ideas. It begins with a broad characterisation of the project of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, which he calls 'political science' (*hê politikê epistêmê*), and the central place of education in his vision of statesmanship. It proceeds through a series of topics fundamental to his educational ideas, culminating in the account of education in *Politics* VIII. A concluding section appraises the uses to which Aristotelian ideas are currently put in philosophy of education, identifying some confusions in the influential literature of 'practices'.

Introduction

The only extended discussion of education in the Aristotelian corpus is in Book VIII of the *Politics*, where Aristotle advocates that schooling be publicly provided and 'one and the same for all' (VIII.1 1337a23). Isolated remarks about education appear in earlier books of the *Politics*, and a few can be found in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and elsewhere. With enough effort, these scattered passages can be understood in relation to one another and in light of the overall plan of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) and *Politics* (*Pol.*).¹ The former concerns ethics, obviously enough, and the latter concerns 'legislative science' (*nomothetikê*), but they are closely related to each other as parts of the larger enterprise Aristotle calls 'political science' (*hê politikê epistêmê* or *hê politikê*; *NE* I.2, X.9; Adkins, 1991). As Aristotle conceives it, the general aim of political science is to determine the truth about human happiness (*eudaimonia*)—'the highest of all goods achievable by action' (*NE* I.4 1095a15–20)—and to guide societies (*Pol.* IV.1 1288b21–89a7, III.8 1279b12–25; *NE* VII.11 1152b1–2) and households (*NE* X.9 1180a25 ff.) toward happiness.² A central

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claim about happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is that it requires the possession and exercise of intellectual and moral virtues, and a central related feature of the *Politics* is its identification of education that cultivates these virtues as the *primary* tool of statesmanship (*Pol.* VIII.1). Education is as important to Aristotle's conception of a political community as it is to Plato's, though Aristotle would seem to have had less patience with spelling out the details.

A revival of interest in Aristotle's ethics was well underway in the 1970s (see Cooper, 1975; Barnes *et al.*, 1977; Rorty, 1980), and a revival of his politics followed (see Keyt & Miller, 1991; Yack, 1993; Miller, 1995), yielding more integrated readings of the texts and topics that span them (see, e.g., Cooper, 1999; Curren, 2000; Kraut, 2002; Roberts, 1989, 2009).

An Aristotelian renaissance in philosophy of education has meanwhile developed largely as an offshoot of the virtue ethics movement associated with the revival of Aristotle's ethics. This has arguably done much to advance our understanding of moral development and education (see Pincoffs, 1986; Carr, 1991; Carr & Steutel, 1999; Curren, 2002a; Kristjánsson, 2007), and to reestablish human flourishing as a theorised aim of education (White & White, 1986; Kupperman, 1987; Hirst, 1998; Strike, 2003; Brighouse, 2006; Nussbaum, 2006; Curren, 2009a). Apart from and substantially prior to the virtue ethics movement, interest in Aristotle's account of practical reason yielded a significant literature on teacher competence and curriculum (Schwab, 1969; Green, 1976; Fenstermacher & Richardson, 1993). The limitation of an Aristotelian renaissance largely independent of scholarship in ancient Greek philosophy is not inconsequential, however. Opportunities have been missed and mistakes have attracted a substantial following.

My aim in this paper is to survey Aristotle's educational thought, noting some interpretive controversies, commenting on related developments and missed opportunities in contemporary educational thought, and questioning the Aristotelian credentials of a major body of recently influential work in philosophy of education. The work I will question concerns the nature of teaching and denies that *phronêsis* (practical wisdom, good judgment) has for Aristotle the 'universal' element, or element of systematic knowledge of principles, he says it has (Dunne, 1997; McLaughlin, 1999; Smith, 1999; MacIntyre & Dunne, 2002; Dunne & Pendelbury, 2003; Hogan & Smith, 2003; Carr, 2005). It deploys this understanding of *phronêsis*, together with some related claims about crafts and practices, to defend the professional autonomy of educators against managerial encroachment. I shall challenge the Aristotelian credentials of this work, but also suggest how a more accurate understanding of Aristotle's philosophy of education can be harnessed to much the same end. The universal element in *phronêsis* was obscured by some of the interpretations of the 1980s, sometimes in constructing *particularist* forms of virtue ethics, but to say that *phronêsis* 'is concerned not only with universals but with particulars, which become familiar from experience' (*NE* VI.8 1142a13-15; cf. 1141b14-16) is to assert unequivocally that it *is* concerned with universals.³

Political science

The *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* are records of lectures intended to equip Aristotle's students with the universal element of *phronêsis*, or a systematic understanding of the human good and how to promote it.⁴ Students must have been 'well brought up in good habits' (*NE* I.4 1095b6) and be experienced 'in the actions that occur in life' (I.4 1095a3) in order to grasp 'the facts' that are the 'starting-points' of ethical and legislative inquiry. A good upbringing and experience of life provide a student with true moral beliefs ('facts'), but these are just the starting points. True virtue (*arête*; see Curren, 1996a) and the systematic *knowledge* required to promote virtue and happiness require more, and Aristotle aspires to provide what is required. His course in ethics is presented as an opportunity to progress dialectically from the possession of ordinary, unsystematic, true or mostly true ethical beliefs to a systematic, reasoned body of ethical knowledge (*epistêmê*) resting in an account of human nature and well-being (see Reeve, 2000, pp. 21–27, on dialectic and the first principles of sciences). The student's antecedent beliefs are to be worked into a coherent, interconnected, and grounded whole—the ethical *knowledge* required for *phronêsis*. There is, thus, in the very framing of Aristotle's project and its audience, an announcement of his practical philosophy as both a *science* intended to guide practice and a *curriculum* for all who would aspire to happiness in their own lives or the lives of others—the curricular prerequisites of *phronêsis*. He follows Plato in frequently invoking the role of medical science (*epistêmê*) in medical practice as a guiding analogy for the role of political science in human affairs (*NE* I.13 1102a7–25; II.2 1104a5–9; III.3 1112b12–15; X.9 1180b13–29; *Pol.* I.9 1257b25–32; II.8 1268b33–39; see also Jaeger, 1957; Lloyd, 1968). The reference to medicine at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (X.9) is especially telling:

But individuals can be best cared for by a doctor or gymnastic instructor or anyone else who has the universal knowledge of what is good for every one or for people of a certain kind ...

And surely he who wants to make men, whether many or few, better by his care must try to be capable of legislating, if it is through laws that we can become good. For to get anyone whatever—anyone who is put before us—into the right condition is not for the first chance comer; if anyone can do it, it is the man who knows, just as in medicine and all other matters which give scope for care and practical wisdom. (1180b13–29)

Educating is described here as a form of care, an art (*technê*) comparable to medicine or gymnastic instruction, grounded in a science (*epistêmê*), namely the *hê politikê epistêmê* he offers his own students.⁵ A *technê* is indeed a *form* of science or knowledge in Aristotle's scheme of things (*Met.* I.1 981b7–10, XI.7 1063b35–64a18; *Top.* VI.6 145a15–18), politics itself being referred to as both a *technê*—a master art or *architektonikês*—and an *episteme*, and as determining 'which of the sciences should be studied,' who should learn them, 'and up to what point they should learn them' (*NE* I.1–2 1094a1–b2).

Aristotle does say, famously and having just identified his topic as political science, that ethical matters are 'only for the most part true' (*NE* I.3 1094b21). This has

created some puzzlement about how he could claim to establish ethics and politics as sciences, consistent with his declaration that strictly speaking a science can only pertain to what ‘does not admit of being otherwise’ (*NE* VI.3 1139b18-24). Yet, Aristotle does speak less strictly of scientific knowledge of ‘what holds always or for the most part (*hôs epi to polu*)’ (*Met.* VI.2 1027a19-21), or what holds true by a necessity qualified by the indeterminateness of the matter in which objects of concern to some sciences are embodied (see Reeve, 2000, pp. 27–42). Aristotle identifies sciences as systematic bodies of truths pertaining to the nature of unchanging objects of knowledge (*NE* VI.3 1139b20-25); ethics pertains to the nature, function and varieties of the human psyche (i.e., the varieties of character, which do or do not fulfill that function), and politics pertains to the nature, function and varieties of the *polis* (i.e., the varieties of political constitution, which do or do not fulfill that function). Structurally, these are sciences not unlike *logic*, as Aristotle invented it, logic being the science pertaining to the nature, function and varieties—varieties that do or do not fulfill the function of preserving truth—of syllogisms. Ethics and politics take unchanging natures as their enduring objects of knowledge and they elaborate systematically the domains of truths that come to rest in the comprehension of those natures. What is true invariably of the natures may be true ‘only for the most part’ of the embodied creatures and cities (*polises*) that are the focus of practical concern; the latter may fail to be true to their natures for reasons more or less systematically diagnosable through insight into the qualities of their ‘matter’, a theme sounded repeatedly through the middle books of the *Politics* in observations about the difference the characteristics of a population make to a city’s fulfillment of its function (*Pol.* IV-VI).

Having noted these general features of Aristotle’s vision of political science, we can now best approach the substance of his educational views through an ordered survey of the large moving pieces of his ethical-political theory. To this end, we must now consider the moral and intellectual virtues, how they are acquired and how they are related to one another; the happiest kind of life and the role of virtue in achieving it; the nature of a political community; Aristotle’s theory of constitutions and the ‘best possible’ society described in Book VII of the *Politics*; the context these provide for the account of education in Book VIII of the *Politics*.

The virtues

In the final book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (X.9), Aristotle observes that reasoned arguments alone are not enough to make people good. Many people are not moved by arguments based on what is admirable or appropriate (*kalon*), because they lack even a conception of what is *kalon*, having never been exposed to it (1179b4-15). He goes on to say that ‘nature’ (i.e., traits one is born with), habituation (training in doing the right things) and teaching must *all* be favourable in order for a person to become good, so there is little chance of becoming good if one does not grow up under good laws. We learn in Books VII and VIII of the *Politics* that those laws should, among other things, provide schooling that is public and ‘the same for all’ (VIII.1 1337a23-24). Book VIII opens with the remarkable suggestion that ‘No one will

doubt that the legislator should direct his attention above all to the education of youth' (1337a10-11)—remarkable because *public* or state-sponsored education was unknown in his world apart from some military training. It reflects a conviction that societies have a fundamental, collective duty—a duty falling on governments—to enable the young to develop into good and flourishing adults. The laws should regulate birth and early training in order to ensure the healthy development of the body and the desiring part of the psyche, all with an eye to the development of 'reason and mind' (VII.15 1334b15-17). Aristotle says this sequence of development is 'natural', but he regards the fulfillment of a person's intellectual potential as something rare and difficult to achieve.

Aristotle defines moral virtues as dispositions to feel and be moved by our desires or emotions neither too weakly nor too strongly, but in a way that moves us to act as reason would dictate, and to take pleasure in doing so (*NE* II.2-6). Intellectual virtues are defined as capacities or powers of understanding, judgment and reasoning that enable us to attain truth (*NE* VI.2 1139b11-13). Treating the moral virtues as states of the irrational part of the psyche, he regards them as laying a necessary foundation for the development of intellectual virtues.

Having distinguished the moral and intellectual virtues in this way, Aristotle says the former mainly arise as a result of habit and the latter mainly arise as a result of teaching (*NE* II.1). The understanding of his conception of moral development often goes no farther than the associated idea that we become brave by repeatedly doing the right thing in the face of danger and become cowardly by repeatedly fleeing or cowering in the face of danger. Yet, there are two very important further aspects to Aristotle's conception of moral virtue and its development. The first is that 'habit' cannot mean thoughtless, unguided repetition (Sherman, 1989). The conduct in question must be shaped in all its details towards what is desirable. This requires supervision to ensure that the learner does the right thing, and *coaching* that leads her through progressive mastery of various nuances of what she is doing, calling her attention to aspects of it she will not have *perceived* nor had any language to describe. Supervision and coaching enable learners to *progress* and become *self-directed* in their practice and habits.

The second overlooked aspect of Aristotle's conception of moral development is that the moral virtues are *both* a necessary step towards, and only completed by, the acquisition of the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom or good judgment (VI.12 1144a29-37; VI.13 1144b7-20 and 30-32; Curren, 2000, pp. 202–204). Aristotle asserts a *unity of virtue* thesis, which holds there are interdependencies between the possession of good judgment and the possession of moral virtues. No moral virtue is a *true* virtue unless it is guided by good judgment, and no one can develop good judgment without first possessing natural or habituated forms of the moral virtues. Moral virtues are dispositions of desire, emotion and perception that lead us to choose and do what it is reasonable for us to choose and do, all the while *perceiving* our choices and actions to be reasonable. Moral virtues thereby establish the ends we aim at, while good judgment enables us to achieve those ends. Virtue that is merely *habitual* might suffice in familiar circumstances, but it will not *reliably* guide us to the right or

best act. A *true* virtue is supposed to be good without qualification, so it must be guided by good judgment which prevents its possessor from going astray in challenging circumstances.

The unity of virtue thesis also holds that in order to have good judgment one must possess all the moral virtues. The possession of good judgment is only possible if one perceives the world accurately in all its moral particularity, and according to Aristotle our perceptions are largely shaped by what we have experienced as normal. The ways we have habitually acted and the ends we have habitually pursued will seem to us acceptable and good. An aspect of the formation of (habitual) moral virtues or vices is thus the habituation of corresponding perceptions, accurate or inaccurate. Since good judgment requires accurate perceptions, it also requires the possession of the moral virtues pertaining to different spheres and aspects of conduct.

By Aristotle's lights, good practical judgment (*phronêsis*) subsumes particular cases, well perceived, under universal principles acquired through teaching. Perceiving the particulars well requires virtue, as we have seen, but also experience and discussion that enables one to benefit from the perceptions of others. Learning the universal principles begins, as we have seen, with the acquisition of true ethical beliefs in the course of a sound moral upbringing, and it proceeds through a study of political science that refines and shapes those beliefs into a systematic, interconnected whole—a 'scientific' understanding of human affairs.

Human flourishing

Aristotle employs a whole battery of arguments in Books I and X of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and Book VII of the *Politics* to show that the highest good and happiest life for human beings is a life devoted to intellectual inquiry or 'contemplation' as its highest aim.⁶ The most intuitive of his reasons is that what is most satisfying is putting our greatest gifts, our intellectual capacities, to good use. As he says in *NE* I.7, the highest good for human beings is activity that exhibits virtue of the 'best and most complete' kind, or in other words *sophia*, the wisdom that pertains to intellectual inquiry or 'contemplation' (1098a16-18). Another argument compares the two strongest candidates for being the highest good: the life that takes contemplation as its highest end and the life that takes statesmanship or political leadership as its highest end. The contemplative life qualifies as the highest good for human beings, because it is not only desirable for itself (being intrinsically satisfying), but aims at nothing beyond itself (*NE* X.7. 1177a16-18; *Pol.* VII.3 1325b14-32). The political life cannot qualify as a highest good, because the activity of statesmanship aims at something beyond itself—ideally, the well-being of the statesman's society. In aiming at something beyond itself it is not 'complete' in itself, and the virtue it exhibits is not 'complete'. The political life may be a happy life for some, if it genuinely exhibits the virtue of practical wisdom—the second best and most complete human virtue—but it cannot constitute the best kind of life or highest good for a human being.

Once one recognises that Aristotle identifies only two kinds of lives as genuinely happy, the contemplative life being the happiest and the political life being happy 'in

a secondary degree' (*NE* X.8 1178a9), it is easy to understand his deepest argument for believing that only someone who possesses moral virtue can be happy. It is intrinsic to both of these kinds of lives that they involve the exercise of intellectual virtues which, according to the *unity of virtue* thesis, cannot be possessed by someone who lacks the moral virtues (Kraut, 1989). The accurate perceptions associated with the moral virtues are required for both *phronêsis* and *sophia*, since both are concerned with truth, including truths about human affairs.⁷ Understanding this sheds light on Aristotle's idea in *Politics* VII that the training of the irrational psyche should aim at 'reason and mind'. It should prepare the way for the acquisition of the intellectual virtues, whose exercise is central to a happy life, by ensuring that a person's perceptions of what is good and appropriate are not corrupted by growing accustomed to doing bad or inappropriate things.

Political communities

Aristotle's *Politics* begins with an account of the origin and growth of polises (politically autonomous cities), and his famous claim that human beings are 'political animals' (*politikon zôon*). What this means is not that human beings naturally engage in political activities, but that they are gregarious, *need* to live together in cities in order to live the best kind of life, and are equipped by language to live as a *community* consciously organised in pursuit of the best kind of life (*I.2* 1252a8-53a30; Miller, 1995, pp. 30–45). As Aristotle conceives it, a political society should be a mutually beneficial partnership to which everyone freely consents (*Pol. I.13* 1259b37-60a2; *III.3* 1276a8-16, *III.4* 1277b8-30, *III.6* 1297b17-22, *VII.2* 1324a24-25, etc.). As a *partnership* in pursuit of the best kind of life, a political community must be socially unified, collectively governed, of one mind in its conception of the best kind of life, and egalitarian. A true political community is unified by friendship, and friendship requires at least a semblance of equality (*VII.8* 1328a35-36; *II.4* 1262b7-10, etc.).

Yet, existing societies are not unified, Aristotle says. His concern, like Plato's, was how societies might become more peaceful, stable and secure against the factional conflict that ensured most governments in their world were short-lived. In the *Republic*, Plato imagined a scheme for common rearing of children in which parents would not even know whose child was whose. He imagined that, in this way, rivalries between families might be restrained and a stronger sense of civic community might emerge. In Book II of the *Politics*, Aristotle rejects this scheme. He agrees that a society must be unified by friendship to be secure against factional conflict, but he thinks a more promising way to accomplish this is through civic institutions that nurture friendships bridging all social groups. The most important of these civic institutions is *common schools*—public day schools—in which a city's diverse children 'grow up together' at least a few hours a day (*V.9* 1310a12-25). It is through education that societies can be unified and made into a community, Aristotle advises (*Pol. II.5* 1263b37-38; see Curren, 2000, p. 131 ff, 2002c).

Aristotle goes on (in *Pol. III*) to elaborate an account of constitutions and the proper forms of political rule, distinguishing the true, just or legitimate forms of

constitution from those that are corrupt, unjust or illegitimate. As one would expect, the former aim at the common good and operate on the basis of consent, while the latter aim only at the good of the rulers and rely on force (III.6 1279a17-22). The former promote partnership in living well, hence mutual trust and goodwill, while the latter may seek to divide and enfeeble the populace in order to prevent unified and effective resistance to its rule. Just regimes are based upon a *rule of law*, which no one is above, and their laws are worthy of respect. Unjust regimes are by contrast ‘lawless’ or ‘unconstitutional’, and the unjust requirements they announce as laws have no claim to being obeyed.

Of the just forms of constitution, *polity* is the best that can be attained by most societies, and it is for that reason the goal towards which the reform of actual societies should aim. It is both a ‘mixed’ constitution, which provides forms of direct participation for citizens of all social classes, and a ‘middle’ constitution, dominated by a large middle class. This is just because it respects the right of all citizens to participate (*Pol.* III.9 1280a9-b7; *NE* V.3 1131a24-28), and it is beneficial because moderation of wealth is conducive to living well and a large middle class serves as a bulwark against destructive political polarisation.

Kingship is Aristotle’s theoretically ideal system, but he dismisses it as ‘unattainable’, leaving an ideal form of aristocracy as the best constitution that might be possible in highly favourable circumstances. Aristotle regards an ordinary aristocracy, or rule in the common interest over willing citizens by a few who are genuinely the best (*aristoi*), as a legitimate form of constitution.⁸ In Book VII of the *Politics*, he imagines a constitution in which *all* of the citizens rule and *possess the true virtue required to live the best kind of life*. This would be an ideal aristocracy in which all of the citizens are voluntary partners in living the best kind of life. Since the citizens would be partners in this, they must have leisure from productive activities so they can acquire the highest virtue and make activity in accordance with it the dominating concern of their lives. Those who engage in productive activity, namely artisans, traders and farmers, would be necessary to the political society but not *members* of it. They might be resident aliens at best, maybe slaves but not citizens, though dealings with them should still be based on mutual benefit. (It goes without saying that Aristotle has no plausible account of how slavery could benefit the slave.) Citizens would share in ruling and being ruled, and land holdings would be divided among the citizens, assuring the moderation of wealth conducive to equal citizenship and a life of virtue. Three institutions are mentioned as conducive to virtue and the social unity necessary to a true community: common meals or dining clubs, common religious observances, and common schools. In the closing chapters of Book VII, we come to matters of child-birth, childcare and the training of habits, and schooling, where (as we have seen) everything should aim at the proper development of the rational element of the psyche—the ‘best part’ in human nature, the flourishing of which is intrinsic to living the best kind of life. Since this ‘ideal aristocracy’ is to be a society of virtuous equals living in partnership in pursuit of the best kind of life, every citizen must receive an education in virtue, and should receive it in the context of common schools in which all citizen children are educated together.

Education

Two ideas dominate the opening of Book VIII of the *Politics*. One is that education is a prerequisite for the practice of virtue, and is thus a matter of public concern (1337a20-21). The foregoing makes this easy enough to understand: the proper aim of politics is to enable citizens to live the best kind of life. In order to live such a life, a person must be virtuous. The development of virtue depends on a variety of things beyond a person's control. To educate someone is to train and teach him so he acquires the moral and intellectual virtues, develops the good judgment needed for prudent self-governance and participation in political rule, and learns to take pleasure in the excellent activities with which a good life is occupied. It makes perfect sense that Aristotle says in VIII.5 that the main concern of education is to 'cultivate ... the power of forming right judgments, and of taking delight in good dispositions and admirable actions' (1340a15-19). He says elsewhere that to be educated is to be able to form a sound judgment of an investigation or exposition, a person of 'universal education' being one who is able to do this in all or nearly all domains of knowledge (*De partibus animalium* 639a1-5).

Note well that education is a preparation for leisure 'spent in intellectual activity', according to Aristotle (VIII.3 1338a10-11). It is not a preparation for work, as is so often now assumed. Greek education in *gymnastikê* (athletics) and *musikê* (music, poetry and narratives—the 'Arts of the Muses') was from the beginning a preparation for leisure (see Curren, 1996b). The knightly warriors of Athens who originally received it spent their daytime leisure in athletic contests and their nighttime leisure at drinking parties where they entertained each other with music and recitations. The subsequent democratisation of Athens and invention of group lessons altered this 'old education', in part by introducing the commercially useful arts of reading, writing and arithmetic. Leisure was, in any case, not equated with mere *amusement*. It was contrasted with *productive labour* in such a way that public service—even military service—was generally considered a use of leisure, or time not spent in satisfying material needs. For Aristotle, leisure provided the opportunity to flourish as a human being or to pursue what is intrinsically, not just instrumentally, good.

Education should include 'necessary' practical arts, according to Aristotle (VIII.1 1337b3-9), but it should focus on what is 'liberal' or conducive to spending one's leisure in activities that express the best in human nature or best and most complete virtue. Aristotle's lengthy discussion of music emphasises its capacity to shape character and judgment (VIII.5-7). Yet, he notes that even music becomes illiberal or 'mechanical', if it is pursued in order to entertain others (making it an activity that is not complete in itself) and is pursued in such a way that it interferes with the development and exercise of virtue (VIII.6 1341a4-b19). He is not specific about what counts as 'necessary' practical arts, but he probably has in mind what is necessary to meeting one's material needs and exercising virtues that involve the use of external goods. His model is probably a landowner of moderate means who needs to read, write, draw and use arithmetic to prudently manage his farm.

The second dominating idea at the opening of *Politics* VIII is that citizens should be moulded 'to suit the form of government' or constitution (1337a11-19). The character of citizens matters to *preserving* constitutions and also to their *quality*. The better the character of the citizens, the better the constitution, Aristotle says. This is somewhat puzzling, since everything I have attributed to Aristotle suggests that constitutions should be made to suit the needs of the citizen, not the other way around. Moreover, Aristotle says that it is only in the best constitution that the virtues expected of a citizen fully coincide with the virtues of a human being as such (*Pol.* III.4 1277a1-4). Only the best kind of society fully enables the development of independent good judgment and encourages the universal expression of that judgment in public and private life. Since the proper aim of *any* political society is to enable citizens to develop and exercise the best and most complete human virtue, it is not clear how it could be legitimate for any government to educate citizens to have any virtues that deviate from these. What are we to make of this?

First it is important to realise that Aristotle says a great deal in the middle books of the *Politics* about the measures that actual regimes should take to preserve themselves. He identifies injustice as the most important general cause of political instability, and his advice to governments has the effect of encouraging reforms that will make them both more just and longer lasting (V.1 1301a36-b4; Curren, 2000, p. 100 ff.). To the extent that defective regimes adopt his proposed reforms, they will come to approximate polities and have the best form of constitution most societies could hope to have. Public education is introduced in this context as the most valuable of the reforms that can be adopted. Like other reforms, it will not leave a deficient system as it is, but will instead both stabilise and improve it. Indeed, Aristotle says quite explicitly in *Politics* V.9 that the education that 'suits' a constitution is not the kind of education preferred by the rulers of an unjust system (1310a12-25). It is education compatible with a more balanced and moderate system that better serves the interests of all citizens. A critic might object at this point that education should not support anything less than an ideal system. Aristotle's implicit answer is that the best course in human affairs is to proceed through incremental reform transacted through public consultation and shared governance. Education that prepares everyone to employ independent good judgment in shared governance is progress.

Second, it must be recognised that in order for constitutions to 'suit the needs of the citizen', citizens must have certain desirable qualities. A constitution (*politeia*) is not, as Aristotle understood it, simply a blueprint for a form of government, but a functioning political system whose actual patterns are heavily determined by the characteristics of the people involved. Moulding the constitution in such a way as to enable citizens to live the best kind of life requires measures to ensure that citizens are prepared to treat each other with mutual respect and friendly regard for each other's well-being. It requires that citizens have fellow citizens who will in a variety of ways allow them the satisfaction of fulfilling their human potential.

The contemporary import of Aristotle's philosophy of education

Understood within the larger context of his philosophy of human affairs, Aristotle's philosophy of education offers valuable starting points for addressing several topics of enduring interest. One must surely count among these his account of the virtues and their development, his conception of what is good for human beings, his ideas about the relationships between virtue, law and education, and his defence of public education.

I noted at the outset that Aristotle's account of the virtues has been fundamental to a major movement in moral theory and the related broad swath of scholarship on moral development and education. Neo-Aristotelian approaches restored a measure of plausibility to the philosophy of moral education by defending roles for both habituation and critical reason, in an era when neo-Kantian notions of stimulating children to clarify and self-impose their own values had dominated the landscape. They have arguably enriched and advanced debate by arguing that habituation, perception, emotion and judgment are developmentally interrelated, and by confronting puzzles concerning the relationship between habituation and autonomous good judgment (Peters, 1981, pp. 45–60; Curren, 2000, pp. 205–212; 2006; Kristjánsson, 2007, pp. 31–48). They have also arguably provided the basis for more plausible accounts of the role of motivation in moral learning, by addressing desire and perception.

The Aristotelian notion that governments and schools should make human well-being or flourishing their central aim has also had some arguably salutary influence, through arguments that contest to some degree the value neutrality of liberalism (see White & White, 1986; Kupperman, 1987), views that hold the chief purpose of education is to develop human capabilities or promote flourishing (Brighouse, 2006; Nussbaum, 2003, 2006), and conceptions of education that make initiation into 'practices' definitive of, or essential to, its nature (Hirst, 1998; MacIntyre & Dunne, 2002; Strike, 2003; Curren, 2009a). Some such 'practice' oriented views treat the 'goods' made accessible to learners through initiation as purely internal to the practices, and others are ambiguous as to whether these goods are purely internal. My own view, which is arguably the most authentically Aristotelian, is that the framework of justification we need to guide education is one that identifies what is good for human beings and on that basis identifies practices worthy of perpetuation through schools (Curren, 2009a, pp. 52–54). We must, of course, set aside Aristotle's idea that there is one best life for human beings, but there is nevertheless much to be said for his idea that what is most satisfying in life is experiencing the development and self-directed employment of our abilities. It is an idea which must, however, be placed within a wider and empirically grounded understanding of human needs and happiness.

Other aspects of Aristotle's philosophy of education have been all but ignored, presumably because his *Politics* is a more daunting work than the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and one more burdened with unattractive features. These are not trivial obstacles, but there are nevertheless some themes in—and just below the surface of—the *Politics* that are important for contemporary educational debate. The most important of these is

Aristotle's 'developmental' view of reason, and its bearing on the relationships between law and education.⁹ If reasonableness is a human quality that develops by degrees and needs assistance to develop, and an ethic of respect for people as rational beings requires dealing with people as much as possible through truthful and reasoned instruction and persuasion and as little as possible through force and violence (see Curren, 2000, p. 21 ff., 2002a), then the foundations of law and government rest more crucially on adequate education for everyone than we generally realise. The legitimacy of a government and a rule of law will rest on conscientious education that prepares everyone to voluntarily accept the reasonable expectations of law on the basis of their independent good judgment. This is a much more extensive educational task than it may at first seem, largely because ongoing consent to new legislation is transacted through participation in the public life of a democracy, for which citizens must be prepared. This is arguably the strongest argument for public education and equitable provision of education to be found in the *Politics*, and one that remains compelling.¹⁰

In the foreground of the *Politics* are concerns about equity in enabling all the members of a society to live well, the need for civic education to promote intelligent cooperation in the enterprise of shared governance, and the value of schooling different kinds of children together so they may learn to know and respect each other as equals. These are still important concerns, and wealth and poverty matter to all of them today, just as they did in Aristotle's world. His was not a multicultural world in the way ours is, but the patterns of conflict that concerned him are perennial. Aristotle is often invoked in the communitarian literature, a literature very sympathetic to calls for separate and culturally homogeneous schooling, but the Aristotelian course in these matters would be to hold onto the common school ideal to the extent we can productively approximate it.

The educational literature of teaching and *phronêsis* that I referred to at the start of this paper seems to have been directly inspired by the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, a central figure in the communitarian movement, though he has himself repudiated its central claims (MacIntyre & Dunne, 2002). Of all the Aristotelian strands in philosophy of education, this is perhaps the most active and influential at present. I shall close with a critique of its central claims, and note how a more authentically Aristotelian argument might be brought in defence of the professional autonomy of educators.

Kristján Kristjánsson has offered a detailed critique of the body of work in question, referring to its shared commitments as the *phronêsis praxis* perspective (*PPP*) (Kristjánsson, 2007, pp. 157–173). I will not rehearse his arguments, which are essentially on target, but will instead offer a much briefer critique based on the sketch of Aristotle's views I have provided.¹¹ According to *PPP*, teaching is not an art (*technê*) comparable to medicine and gymnastic instruction, as Aristotle implies in *Nicomachean Ethics* X.9. It is said to be not a productive art (like medicine) or practical science (like political science) that aims at something beyond itself, but a 'practice' (*praxis*) engaged in for itself and nothing beyond itself. In Aristotelian terms, this would make teaching an activity that qualifies as a highest end. If teaching were nothing more than

engaging in contemplation with students for the sheer pleasure of it, this might make sense, but Aristotle's account of education presents a very different conception of teaching. The activity of teaching is unequivocally understood to aim at something beyond itself, namely the formation of students, just as the art of politics, to which education is subsidiary, is understood to aim at the formation and thereby happiness of citizens. Notice that if the activity of teaching *did* qualify as a highest end for Aristotle, it would qualify by reason of expressing the virtue of contemplative wisdom or *sophia*. According to Joseph Dunne and those who have followed him in adopting *PPP*, the virtue expressed in teaching is *phronêsis*, which is correct but not helpful to their view.

A crucial further element of *PPP* is the claim that *phronêsis* is not grounded in any body of science or 'theory'.¹² Having already seen in some detail the error in this, what remains to be said of this claim is that it is presented as: (1) a way to dissolve puzzles concerning how theory can guide practice; (2) a way to establish that:

education is a distinctive practice with an integrity of its own, and that this *entitles* that practice to a decisive measure of autonomy in carrying out its work. (Hogan & Smith, 2003, p. 166, italics added; cf. Blake *et al.*, 2003, p. 7; Dunne, 1997, p. 364 ff.)

I have not found in the paper this is quoted from, or in any related works, an actual argument for the claim that the integrity of educational practice *entitles* educators to professional autonomy. Supposing the activity of teaching were a practice engaged in for itself and nothing beyond itself, what is quite unclear is why anyone would be entitled to engage in that activity with other people's children, at other people's expense, free of external constraint, guidance and expectations.

As much as I find *PPP* both un-Aristotelian and philosophically irreparable, I do sympathise with the desire to shield teaching and learning from the unrelentingly instrumentalist and controlling pressures of the age. I also sympathise with the intuition that Aristotelian resources can be put to good use in this endeavour. The argument I have made in my own work on academic leadership (writing here not of schools, but of universities) is that:

an academic institution's mission cannot be understood in a purely or even dominantly instrumental sense, because the goods belonging to the enterprise of higher education are in large measure internal to the practices of inquiry and learning; i.e., internal to the unimpeded activities of academic communities themselves. If institutions of higher learning do not initiate students into forms of inquiry and other practices (such as the arts) that are more intrinsically rewarding than what they could devote themselves to without a higher education, then they will have failed....

A good institution of higher learning is like a good political system [that enables people to flourish as human beings] ... It is governed in a way that enables it to be a community or partnership in unimpeded pursuit of academic goods, which is to say an institution in which people drawn to the value of such work are able to flourish in doing it. (Curren, 2008, p. 351)

This is no argument against accountability or demands that teaching serve ends beyond the initiation of students into practices that offer intrinsic rewards, and it would be inconsistent with Aristotle's philosophy of education if it were. What it is,

and can be, is a defence of the view that institutions that leave no room for intrinsically rewarding teaching and learning are not educational institutions, whatever we may call them.¹³

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Notes

1. This was indeed my purpose in *Aristotle on the necessity of public education* (Curren, 2000). The present article relies fundamentally on interpretive arguments developed in detail in that work. For some points of clarification and philosophical expansion, see Curren 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2006 and 2009b. The translations quoted in this paper are from the Revised Oxford Translations in Barnes, 1984.
2. For an account of Aristotle's audience, see Bodéüs, 1993.
3. See Sherman, 1989, for a particularist reading, and compare Reeve, 1992 and 2000, which take Aristotle at his word.
4. For what is known about Aristotle's school, the Lyceum, see Lynch, 1972.
5. 'Art' is a more idiomatic translation of *technê* in some contexts, and 'craft' is more idiomatic in others. Contemporary usage commends medical 'arts' but Socrates' understanding of virtue as a 'craft', a form of knowledge resting in definitions of the virtues; politics as soul 'craft' but the 'art' of governing.
6. For a comprehensive defence of this reading and consideration of the leading alternatives, see Kraut, 1989. Kraut argues that it is the unity of the virtues that makes moral virtue *internally* (psychically) essential to a happy life.
7. An alternative, 'inclusive ends' interpretation of *eudaimonia* and its dependence on moral virtue attributes to Aristotle the view that a happy *human* life—unlike a god's life—essentially involves virtuous participation in a human community. The texts typically cited include *NE* 1097b11, 1140b7-11, 1177b27-28, 1178b5-8 and 1179a22-32 (see Depew, 1991; Miller, 1995, pp. 346–357; Roberts, 2009, pp. 9–10), but they are hardly decisive. What seems true is that: (1) virtue is essential to enjoying intimate good friendship, which Aristotle identifies as the greatest 'external' good; (2) widespread virtue with respect to others is essential to a city capable of enabling one to live well.
8. 'Ordinary' aristocracy is, of course, itself an ideal. Most so-called aristocracies are actually oligarchies ruled by persons of wealth posing as 'the best' or most virtuous.
9. It is important to recognise that one can dismiss the idea that development occurs in stages, with the emergence of reasoning trailing behind the formation of desire, yet still hold that the development of reasonableness is incremental, dependent on factors and efforts beyond the learner's control, and may remain incomplete (as it is in much of our prison populations; see Curren, 2002a). Stables, 2008 is not the first work to argue in one way or another that Aristotle is wrong because children are already rational and do not require the formative care we imagine. These arguments focus on circumscribed forms of rationality and fail to acknowledge the incremental nature and gradual, socially mediated development of good judgment and capacities of self-management. See Purdy, 1992, for a powerful, virtue-centred refutation of such arguments.
10. A great deal of Curren, 2000 is devoted to establishing this.
11. There is of course substantial overlap between my critique and Kristjánsson's, as well as points of divergence. In the interest of brevity I must leave it to interested readers to consult his

splendid book for themselves. It corrects other abuses of Aristotle's ideas in the moral education literature, which I won't address.

12. Dunne writes, in a characteristic passage, that 'the great significance of Aristotle lies in the fact that he ... set limits to the sway of *techne* and, through his novel conception of *phronesis*, provided a rich analysis of the kind of knowledge that guides ... characteristically human—and therefore inescapably ethical—activity (*praxis*)' (Dunne & Pendlebury, 2003, p. 200). He asserts a few lines later that *phronêsis* is irreducible 'to general propositions' (p. 201). It being a virtue, this can scarcely be denied, but it does not at all follow that the universal principles that inform good practical judgment will never, in the circumstances discerned, point clearly to a course of action. Dunne's rejection of 'technique' rests on a form of contextualism about judgment that Aristotle did not hold.
13. On intrinsic rewards in learning, the damaging consequences for students of administrative pressures on teachers, and the value of theory in guiding good practice, see Pelletier & Sharp, 2009; Ryan & Niemiec, 2009a, b. The empirically grounded theory in question incorporates a form of *eudaimonism* broadly inspired by Aristotle's account of well-being. Aristotle's philosophy being a naturalistic one with aspirations to science, it is entirely within the spirit of his project to wed contemporary applications of it with empirical research (see Curren, 2006, pp. 465–468).

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