

**BECOMING WHAT  
WE ARE THE  
ARISTOTELIAN -  
THOMISTIC GOAL  
OF EDUCATION**

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**FOSTERING PERSONAL AND  
SOCIAL VIRTUES IN  
EDUCATION**

There are many serious concerns and problems in our present education system, and many of them are in some way inter-connected. But one of the most serious flaws, and perhaps the root cause for many of the others, is that our present approach to education is largely based on an instrumental-rationalist and materialistic view of the individual, life, and society. Education has been reduced to teaching and technique with aims concerned almost entirely with social efficiency. In this instrumentalised world of educational practice even to raise questions about the aims and purposes suggests that one supports inefficiency and lack of accountability. Because of this dominant mechanical view of education, schooling and university education are often perceived as a means for social success and a doorway to socio-economic upward mobility.

In contrast to this prevailing outlook, I believe that a larger framework and a much wider and deeper purpose for education is needed so as to address these concerns and problems regarding modern education. I propose that an Aristotelian-Thomist framework may provide this deeper purpose for education. Both Aristotle and Aquinas provide us with a philosophy grounded in experience, common sense and intellectual insight. Both of their philosophies are open to all serious reflective questions and are not closed doctrinal systems. Although they were fashioned in the two great ages of premodern thought; those of Classical Greece and of high-medieval Europe, they are far from being outdated philosophies, but rather are important keys to unlocking the answers to some of our 'postmodern' present day problems. Aquinas, in particular, has a rich view of the human person to offer us.

Aquinas also has a many-sided, multiply balanced approach. On the one hand he follows Aristotle in holding that all knowledge arises from experience but he allows that it may nevertheless transcend it, especially with regard to knowledge of God and the order of grace. Again he roots his metaphysics in an understanding of the natural world but extends it to include the immaterial as well as the material. His ethics is connected to an understanding of our animal nature but reaches upwards to include our spiritual orientation. On this account he has an especially rich view of the human person to offer us.

Like Aristotle, Aquinas was a teacher who spent a great deal of time engaging and developing the minds of learners. Both believed that it is the duty of all teachers to make themselves easily understood. They also believed that real teachers must be concerned with truth both theoretical or 'scientific' and practical, and that in expounding this and enabling students to discover it for themselves, they must not confuse their pupils. Of course, they knew as we do that it is not easy to be both concise and clear while also not concealing the complexities of things. And it is hard to get to the truth of them.

Some think that learning is simply a matter of the right teaching method supplemented by the latest research. Aquinas believed that learning may be initiated by a teacher, but stressed that a good teacher must build his teaching on the gradual development of human nature. He often uses the word *manuductio* to describe the activity of teaching – which translated means 'leading by the hand'. Teaching brings us from truth we already know to the discovery of truth hitherto unfamiliar or unknown; and in doing so also enables pupils to recognise it in whatever context this discovery applies. Teaching and learning take time and patience – they are not to be rushed. The proper goals of education, for Aquinas, are neither to gather information indifferently, nor to steer study down narrow courses, but to teach us things which are of enduring value through knowledge of different subjects. Education is, for

Aristotle and Aquinas, the formation and development of the ability to think. Aquinas uses the works of Aristotle to bring greater clarity and simplicity to the process of human knowing. Interestingly, what R. S. Peters said in the 1970s about education being an initiation into worthwhile things is exactly what both Aristotle and Aquinas taught hundreds of years earlier.

Aquinas discusses education within the theological and philosophical framework of his major writings. Thomas did not develop a systematic ‘philosophy of education’ as such, although he devoted space in two of his major works to consider the structure of teaching: One, subsequently titled *On the Teacher (De Magistro)*, is devoted to the ‘theory of the educability of the human individual.’ The other major discussion of teaching, *Whether One Man Can Teach Another?* can be found in part one, question 117, article one of his *Summa Theologica*.

Aquinas was the first scholastic thinker to seriously call on every human individual to make actual use of their mind for their own benefit and for the good of society. Therefore, he sees education as having a social dimension and recognises that we continue to learn throughout life. Education advances us towards wisdom and is about ‘Becoming who we are’ – not with the egoistic meaning associated with such phrases today, but in the fundamental sense of ‘human awakening’. Education in this sense is an endless process of ‘becoming’ in this life. Teaching should therefore provide the conditions for pupils to flourish, to find the truth and seek wisdom. It is essentially about the awakened mind.

Aristotle and Aquinas would have said it is in our self-interest to desire the good life, which they argued consisted of each individual living a life of virtue. Only through such a life could a person truly flourish as a human being. The ‘good’ in the ‘good life’, they argued, was common to all by virtue of their common or shared nature. The ‘common good’ is therefore defined in terms of the flourishing of all in society. The implication for the purposes of education is that schooling should encourage and promote the common virtues by which all human beings ought to live if they are to flourish or realise the common good. In sum, he concludes that the virtues determine who we are and the kind of world we see. Virtues are constitutive of the good life and the goal of education is about forming people so they can live well in a world worth living in.

Aquinas, like Aristotle, goes to great lengths to point out what happiness is *not*: it is *not* wealth, pleasure, fame, honours, or power. Not only are these things not in themselves constitutive of happiness, they often become obstacles to it because they entrap the seeker with enjoyments that are ultimately fleeting and unsatisfying.

In terms of the goals of education, Aquinas begins with a definition of a human being: a human being is rational and has free will, is capable of thought and has the power of self-activity or self-determination. He argued, together with Aristotle, that education aims to make the pupil like or dislike what he or she ought and to love the good. To this definition he adds a spiritual dimension: a human being is created in the image and likeness of God, the spiritual element in human existence. That spiritual element mandates education's responsibility for spiritual formation. We are composed of both body and soul and neither the soul nor the body is complete on its own.

Second, self-activity is the cornerstone for teaching all disciplines. Aquinas, following Aristotle, argues that human beings are rational, and learning is a natural tendency. Through

understanding, the pupil derives meaning from things. Making sense of things is a natural function of the pupil's mind, and guides activity in the process of learning. Our desire to know is a necessary part of our human nature and its realization, but it is insufficient. We need intellectual virtues to think rightly together with character virtues that enable us to perform right actions. Aquinas saw that virtues can be known, acquired, and exercised. What is learned should therefore never be passively or mechanically received. Rather, it must be actively transformed into the very life of the mind through comprehension. Education is futile if only memory is trained, and pupils regurgitate to their teachers the platitudes and the inert truths taught. As Aquinas recognised: 'frequent repetition brought weariness to the minds of the hearers'. Aquinas is talking here about teachers, but this is just as true of pupils.

Third, education has the serious task of formation: it is an integration of personality - a character guided by the ultimate ends of life. The purpose of education is to give an individual full possession of his or her powers to see, to dream or imagine, to conceive, to judge, to reason, to feel, to create. Imagination enlivens knowledge. Imagination enables the pupil to see relationships, to ask questions, and to be creative. Aquinas rejected behaviourism because it denied free will.

In summary, if we claim that education prepares human beings for life, it follows that we need some conception of the purpose of that life. The main goal of education is therefore to help human beings become more fully human. Teachers need to ask themselves what kind of person they are seeking to promote, for it is not sensible to pursue an educational aim without considering what its concrete realisations would involve. Teachers need to be conscious of the kind of formation they offer their students since we cannot escape the fact that all education is simply the practical expression of our philosophical convictions. I suggest that schooling should not simply be about acquiring academic and social skills, for it is ultimately about *the kind of person* a pupil becomes. Humans have a purpose beyond being an instrument or tool in social processes; and in order to become a more mature person, an individual needs to grow and flourish within a culture. The richer that culture, the more of a person they have a chance of becoming. Families, institutions and schools have a central educational purpose to develop each individual as fully as possible: making them more human.

Some commentators have equated certain versions of Thomism with poor teaching methods in schools. It should be recognised that rote learning and poor teaching were also common in schools run by the state which is why John Dewey and many others promoted experiential and discovery learning, but it was Aquinas who advocated these 'progressive' educational learning approaches almost 700 years prior to Dewey.

What are the implications for Catholic education? For many, Catholic education has been either too ill-defined and vague or overly authoritative. When ill-defined, it can have the vague goal of simply 'growing closer to God.' or reciting simple statements such as 'God is love', or 'God is Good'. While these are not wrong, failing to ask follow-up questions like 'Why is God good?', 'How is God good?' or 'What does 'good' mean?' does a great injustice to their richness and depth. By using our talents to learn more about our world, we, in turn, can learn more about God and our relationship to God and neighbour. Aquinas believed firmly that both faith and reason ultimately come from God and that the two work in collaboration. You can never make the Christian by merely learning the words of catechisms

or repeating theological formulas. Aquinas helps us awaken to the rich spiritual dimension of education.

**References:**

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