



Fidelity matters: Critical reflections on educational aims

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Abstract

This paper probes the issue of institutional loss of charism. Sacred or secular the issues are similar when institutions lose sight of their original purpose. Often it is drifting with the currents rather than deliberate policy, although commodification and pseudo-science do characterise such situations. We consider aspects of Dewey's approach to educational aims from four angles, as they have some interest in themselves, and because official reviews of education tend to avoid discussion of aims. Such reviews often seem to believe that throwing more money at an educational problem will solve it without mentioning aims. We utilise some distinctions through a Thomistic lens, particularly views of John Finnis, Victor Garcia Hoz, Josef Pieper and Vincent Edward Smith, although we acknowledge some limitations.

Keywords: aims, causality, habits, indoctrination, instrumentalism, metaphysics, person, training, truth

1. Introduction

Much of the inspiration for this paper and its style came from Conway ^[5], though his focus was service at the mission of the Catholic Church in the context of third-level higher education institutions. This paper is also concerned with mission, but from a different perspective. Here the basic issue is when institutions lose sight of their original mission; what Finnis alludes to as historical consciousness ^[8]. We, the authors, both work in Catholic tertiary education: sacred or secular the issues are similar when institutions lose sight of their foundational aims ^[20].

Materials and Methods

In a previous paper ^[18], we compared the views of Dewey and Maritain on the importance of clarity of purpose in education. Here we wish to consider aspects of Dewey's approach to educational aims, as they have some interest in themselves and because official reviews of education tend to avoid them. Such reviews often seem to believe that throwing more money at an educational problem will solve itself without mentioning aims.

Dewey, ever the pragmatist, said that "the aim set up must be an outgrowth of existing conditions" [6: 104]. The need to reappraise constantly the assumptions which underpin any system of education arises for four main reasons. There is a sense in which interest in aims has given way to the pragmatic policy consequences of the massification of higher education, such as academic integrity and diversity ^[9].

In particular, we seek to secure a future for teaching-intensive universities at a time when the focus is on research-intensive universities. In Conway's words: "modern universities are marked by three interrelated characteristics that render them fundamentally inhospitable to Catholic education: instrumentalism, commodification and marketisation" [italics ours]. As Conway notes when he quotes Donal Murray's observation that the conflict is not between religion and the secular but between the searchers for deeper meaning and those who believe that human life has no meaning beyond what can be measured, analysed and scientifically proved" ^[13]. Italics ours again, but the two trios are echoes of each other and capture the dangers of a new dark age.

The parallels between the sacred and secular are strong as Chudy ^[4] observes: “many Catholic families may find themselves caught in between their commitment to their parishes and the demands of the broader secular culture, increasingly perceived as conflictive, ... the dividing line is generational and has increasingly been so since the 1950s”; or, as Suttor perceptively observed at the start of this trend, their affiliations are more about tribal solidarity than the communion of saints! ^[23]. This trend is increasingly found in the national census results of many Western countries where the numbers who identify with a particular religion (or tribe) are many times the numbers who seem to practice that religion, even compared with the large numbers of former Christians who now tick the ‘no religion’ box ^[17, 20].

If the original aims have become confused, then they are easily forgotten. This applies to secular governments as much as to religious institutions. We shall try to unravel some aspects of this claim.

Results and Discussion

Firstly, there are conflicting aims in education. This points to the need to examine why we teach, and why a particular institution was founded.

Secondly, there is the dichotomy between theory and practice; hence, the need to check how we teach. Within these two, there is a need to restore a balanced approach to psychology and philosophy in teacher education. Philosophy of education can often tend to be more about philosophers than about philosophy, because it is claimed that there is insufficient time to explore at depth, even though lip-service is paid to the importance of philosophy in the preparation of teachers ^[2].

Thirdly, “the aim of the school is an intellectual one. A school, as human institution, is more in a material way than an abstract teacher instructing a group of abstract students” [21: 37]. Teaching remotely during the Covid-19 lockdowns has emphasized this. There should be an atmosphere of respect for truth, goodness and beauty; there should be social contact; there should be the opportunity for religious development, counselling, sports programs and so on. “But none of these opportunities is specific to the school as such. The acquisition of knowledge in its truly rational or systematic form requires a special time of life and that special instrument which we call teaching. Whatever the school may share in co-union with other institutions in human life, its proper and specific aim is to impart knowledge through teaching” [ibidem].

Fourthly, “some leading representatives of democratic educational theory, like the late Professor John Dewey, go as far as the Communists in their subordination of education to the needs of the political community. In Professor Dewey’s view, the function of education is not to communicate knowledge or to train scholars in the liberal arts: it is to serve Democracy by making every individual participate in the formation of social values and contribute to what he calls ‘the final pooled intelligence’ which is the democratic mind” [7: 107]. Dewey’s approach is “fatal to the traditional concept of culture since it reverses the natural relation between the teacher and the taught and subordinates the higher intellectual and moral values to the mind of the masses” (ibidem). The only absolute seems to be that truth is relative!

What is education?

The concept of education can be approached in two distinct

ways: formal education and instrumental education. Formal education refers to the process of a student improving themselves based on what the educators provide. This approach views education as a vital activity, much like nutrition is a vital activity for the body to grow and develop. The philosopher John Dewey, for example, believed that education should focus on the development of the whole person, including intellectual, emotional, and physical growth. In contrast, instrumental education focuses on the means or content of education, emphasizing the role of the teacher as the provider of knowledge. Philosopher Étienne Gilson, in his work on education, argued that instrumental education is only concerned with the acquisition of skills and knowledge and not with the development of the whole person.

Both Dewey and Gilson believed that the role of the teacher is not simply to impart knowledge, but to facilitate learning through active engagement with students. For Dewey, education should be experiential, with students learning by doing rather than by simply memorizing information. For Gilson, education should be focused on the student’s individual needs and interests, rather than on a predetermined curriculum.

In summary, the difference between formal and instrumental education lies in the approach to learning and the role of the teacher. While formal education emphasizes self-improvement and growth, instrumental education is focused on the acquisition of knowledge and skills. However, both approaches agree that effective education is not simply the transfer of knowledge, but an active process that requires engagement and facilitation by the teacher. Maritain, on the other hand, believed that education should be focused on developing the student’s moral and intellectual character.

Regardless of the philosophy behind it, education goes beyond simply memorizing information. Instead, it involves actively discovering and learning new information to write on the blank slate of our minds. Teachers play a crucial role in this process by providing guidance and support, rather than simply imparting their own knowledge.

Education can be considered *formally* (that is, according to what it is in itself), or *instrumentally* (that is, according to what it properly presupposes). Formally, the student tries to perfect himself or herself from what the educators provide. In this sense, education is a vital activity, just as nutrition is a vital activity whereby the organism perfects itself from the nutriment provided. Instrumentally, education is the activity of those who provide the means or content of education.

Yet the teacher has much more to do than merely jog the memory of his or her students. We do not start life with an equipment of sluggish knowledge, or with a handy gadget called a race memory; we start off with blank sheet on which we write the truth that we gain either by discovery or by instruction. The students sit at the feet of the teacher, not in the hope of getting a slice of his knowledge, nor of watching the parade of the professor’s own wisdom. The student must see for himself, must know for himself, must possess the truth personally or he is still blind, he has not learned, he has not been taught [21:147-148]. Unfortunately, we live at a time when the *zeitgeist* views truth as relative and subjective, unless it is my truth!

This distinction enables us to apply the aims of education so that we can distinguish it from training and indoctrination. The current approach of constructivism also emphasizes the active role of the student who ‘constructs’ knowledge within

the student’s own mind, but some extreme proponents of this view go further by claiming that the knowledge thus constructed by the student is equally valid with that in the mind of the teacher whether it is true or not. This denigrates both the role of the teacher and the value of knowledge in itself. Yet it is difficult to argue against it if one claims that truth is relative. This, in turn, can result in political information where it is the leader’s truth which is absolute –

in practice if not in fact!

The Thomist, on the other hand, is wedded to the objectivity of truth, and, like the constructivist regards education as being for the good of the person being educated, rather than for the good of the educator. That is, the former is the principal agent, whereas the educator is the instrumental cause, as suggested in Figure 1; complete explanations would take us too far from our main aim in this paper (see ^[25]).

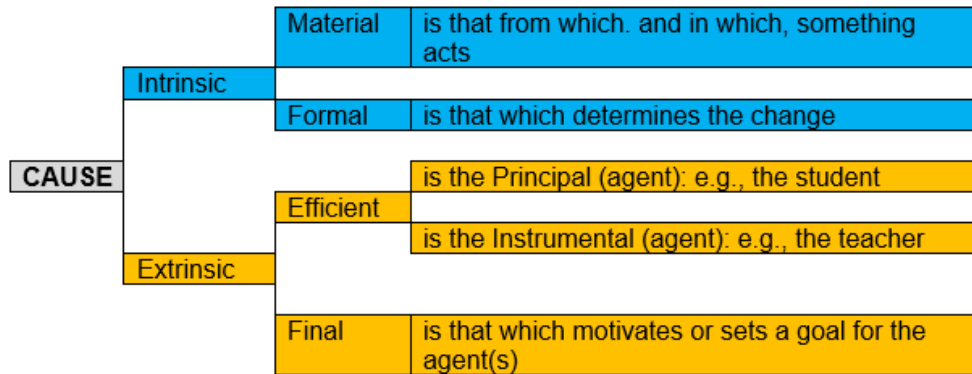


Fig 1: Types of causality

Furthermore, education consists chiefly in the acquisition of habits, as suggested in Figure 2 ^[27]. These are based on intellectual distinctions; they are not necessarily intended to imply physiological separations. A habit can be defined as “a permanent quality according to which a subject is well or

badly disposed in regard to either its being or its operation” [26: 54]. Their connection with the cardinal virtues, common in some form to most religions, is important in educational institutions, whether sacred or secular, for the sustenance of the *raison d’etre* ^[14].

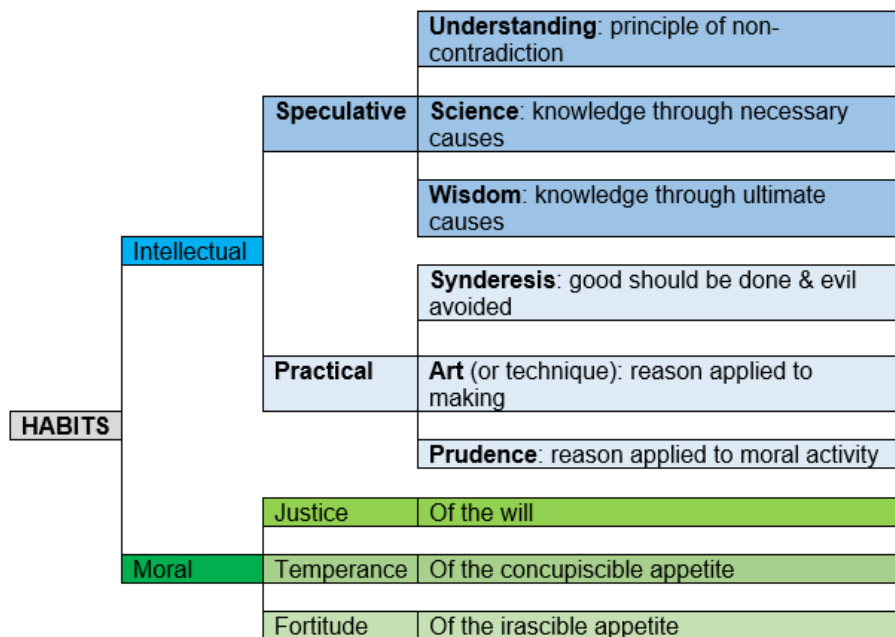


Fig 2: Two types of habits

These distinctions are clearly capable of finer sub-categories; for instance, a philosophical challenge to the principle of non-contradiction came with the intuitionism of Brouwer ^[3], which was further extended by the fuzziness of Zadeh ^[28], both of which were, in a sense, combined within the intuitionistic fuzzy sets of Atanassov ^[1]. These, in turn, can all be applied from the speculative to the practical, as in Sotirova *et al* ^[22] for those who wish to pursue these issues further. “Fuzzy” in this sense does not mean vague thinking ^[16]; it refers to varying degrees of membership (or non-membership) of a reference set.

In a simplified sense and in general, training is for the good of the trainer. For example, a person trains a dog for the good of the person (though the dog benefits from the training). Thus, the trainer is the principal agent, whereas the trainee is the instrumental agent, and training consists in the developments of accustomisations rather than habits. This distinction will offend some trainers because what goes on in the name of education in practice can consist of varying mixes of education, training and indoctrination. Indoctrination is the development of subjectively firm persuasions. These persuasions are not habits, since they are

not objectively stable: that is, their stability is not derived from an evident or perceived necessity of the object, such as the identity between '7 X 9' and 'equal to 63'. Accordingly, these persuasions are dispositions only. They do not perfect the indoctrinated as a person, even if they are true. Indoctrination is the opposite of true education, which Pope Pius XI defined as "the preparation of a human person as he ought to be personally [*i.e.*, freely], and to do as he ought to do personally"^[15]. In educational language, this is essentially equivalent to that of Garcia Hoz, who defined education as "the deliberate cultivation of the specific faculties proper to man"^[11], although Dewey claimed a futility "of trying to establish *the* aim of education [6: 111].

Concluding Comments

Once we get into the realm of the 'person', we are opening up a whole new chapter in teacher education. Thus, Franklin argues for a metaphysics of ethics to justify the fundamental worth of persons as a foundation for ethics: "gross metaphysical differences like that between humans and rocks imply gross moral differences" [9:1]. This grounding of ethics in moral realism is in contrast to the current fashion of evolutionary survival and social fiction. It is also in contrast to the fundamental purpose of this paper which was to urge the consideration of aims in education, whether it is a large-scale public review or in the smaller important scale of the private classroom. The foundational charisma or purpose should remain the final extrinsic cause, not to be lightly discarded by neglect or vogue!

In this sense, "A Catholic educator starts with an assumption (shared by many non-Catholics) that God and religion are the central concern of human existence ... What is man? What is man's chief end? Whence did he come? Whither is he going? How did he come here? Quite patently, the character of education will depend to a large extent on the answers to these questions"^[12]. This is not simply a religious veneer laid upon secular education, but the constant blending of time with eternity, an unshakeable purpose, and fidelity to the spirit of a foundational charisma.

Conflicts of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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