

# *Political Doctrine, Philosophy, and the Value of Education: The Legacy of Isocrates and the Socratic Alternative*

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This paper is concerned with the question, How ought the value of education be decided and defined? There are, in Western educational thought and practice, two answers to this question, the Isocratic and the Socratic. Contrary to most textbooks in the history of education, the Isocratic tradition of educational thought has most influenced Western education, and now constitutes the accepted view even among those who seek to critique the Western tradition. In the dominant Isocratic tradition, education is regarded as a political enterprise, and the value of education is defined relative to political doctrine. In the Socratic view, education is defined as a philosophic enterprise, and the value of education is defined as autonomous and internal to it. The structure of these two modes of examining educational value is outlined. The paper concludes that the question of how we decide what the value of education ought to be must once be asked from the perspective of these two alternatives, and that a recovery of the neglected history of educational philosophy and ideas will be a necessary part of this.

Cet article traite de la question suivante: Comment doit-on déterminer et définir la valeur de l'éducation? Il y a, dans la pensée et la pratique occidentale, deux réponses à cette question, l'une isocratique et l'autre socratique. Contrairement à la plupart des manuels sur l'histoire de l'éducation, la tradition isocratique de la pensée éducative a le plus influencé l'éducation dans le monde occidentale, et elle constitue maintenant la vision la plus acceptée même parmi ceux qui cherchent à critiquer la tradition occidentale. Selon la tradition isocratique dominante, l'éducation est vue comme étant une entreprise politique, et la valeur de l'éducation est définie selon la doctrine politique. Selon la vision socratique, l'éducation est définie comme étant une entreprise

philosophique, et la valeur de l'éducation est définie comme étant à la fois autonome et intrinsèque à cette dernière. La structure de ces deux modes d'études de la valeur éducative est soulignée. L'article conclut que la question sur comment décider de la valeur de l'éducation doit être posée selon ces deux alternatives, et que le recouvrement de l'histoire de la philosophie négligée et des idées en sera une partie nécessaire à cette question.

### *Introduction*

Although we may regret the fact, the interface between children and adults has always been a site of cultural, economic, and political contestation and competition between advocates of various conceptions of the way in which individual interest and the public good may be defined and reconciled. There is a very large number of such conceptions, and it would be tedious and time consuming to attempt to list even a fraction of them. In contemporary educational thought and practice, to mention only some recently prominent examples, we can find advocates who define the best interests of the person in terms of a confirmation of identities of gender and culture, or in terms of maximized economic competitive freedom and advantage. We can find advocates who define the public good in terms of a radically egalitarian and multicultural society, or in terms of a radically libertarian free-market society. Educational debate has focused, often acrimoniously, on the differences between, and relative merits of, the various political doctrines of individual interest and public good, and the way in which education does and/or ought to contribute to the practical implementation of them.

The intention of this paper – and this must be emphasized – is not to argue for or against any particular political doctrine, or their derivative educational proposals. On the contrary, the subject of this paper is strictly limited to understanding the way in which normative questions in education are to be answered. Specifically, my argument is limited to an historical and philosophical examination of how we ought to understand the question of what the value of education ought to be, and of the method(s) which ought to be used to answer this question. The intention of this paper is to examine the historical origins and philosophical merits of a presupposition common to all attempts to define the value of (formal) education in terms of political doctrines and proposals, and to outline an alternative to that

presupposition. This intention has three parts. First, I will use the lost history of educational thought to argue that *all* of these political doctrines and proposals presuppose an identical idea of the *political* nature of education, that this idea originates with Isocrates, and that it is the traditional conception of education in the West. Second, I will argue that this traditional Western conception of education may be unjustified, primarily for two reasons: first, we do not have a fully justified political doctrine and, second and more fundamentally, there is no justification for subjecting education and its autonomous value to the limitations of *any* political doctrine, regardless of how well justified a given doctrine may be. Third, I will argue that Socratic educational thought offers an alternative criterion of educational value that merits recovery and reexamination. A fourth, though informal intention is to suggest that a recovery of a clear consciousness of the question of the value of education, and especially of the history of educational thought concerned with that question, is now *necessary* to both educational theory and any practical educational reform. It is not my purpose in the paper to propose a resolution to the question of how education ought to be valued, but only to try to raise this question from a neglected perspective and to show that we cannot begin to answer it without the almost wholly unused resources of the history of educational thought.

### *The Legacy of Isocrates in Educational Thought*

My philosophical argument about how the value of education ought to be decided depends, in part, on my historical claim that the ancient Greek philosopher Isocrates (436-338 BCE), *and not the Socratic philosophers* (Plato, Aristotle, Xenophon), is the most influential educational theorist in history, and that his ideas are especially pervasive in Western educational thought and practice. The reasons and evidence that support the claim that Isocrates is the most influential educational thinker have been provided elsewhere, so I will only outline this historical claim very briefly here (Burk, 1923; Marrou, 1948, 1984; Muir, 1996, 1998).

When we turn to recent scholarship in the history of educational thought, we encounter what may appear to be a radical difference of opinion between classical historians and educationist historians concerning the importance of Isocrates. On the one hand, classical historians argue that Isocrates, not the Socratic philosophers is the

most influential educational thinker in Western history. As Marrou reminded us, in 1948, on the basis of what remains the most thorough and detailed analysis of the historical record as we have it,

The importance of this fact must be emphasized from the beginning. On the level of history Plato had been defeated: he had failed to impose his educational ideal on posterity. It was Isocrates who defeated him, and who became the educator first of Greece, and subsequently of the whole of the ancient world. (Marrou, 1948 I, p. 292. Cf. p. 128, Author's translation)

Marrou reminds us that the evidence shows that Plato's educational ideas had very little influence in Western education even in the ancient world, and the evidence shows that this is true of the remainder of Western educational history. For example, although Isocrates no longer appears in English language textbooks of the history of education, the following conclusion is common in the recent classical scholarship: "It was the program of Isocrates which has shaped European education to this day, which has kept humanism alive, and which has given Western civilization such unity as it possesses" (Hadas, 1969, p. 129; cf. Marrou, 1984, p. 200; Kimball, 1986, p. 11; Laistner, 1957, p. 447).

It ought to be emphasized that the conclusions of the classical scholars are based on both careful argumentation and detailed study of the historical sources.

In contrast, educationist historians provide no argument for their neglect of Isocrates, and not a single one of them discusses the historical record at all. We find that older histories of education, such as Ulich's *Three Thousand Years of Educational Wisdom* (1954), Curtis and Boulton's *A Short History of Educational Ideas* (1965), Nakosteen's *The History and Philosophy of Education* (1965), and Baskin's *Classics in Education* (1966), as well as two recent, and deplorably uninformed texts, Kaminsky's *A New History of Educational Philosophy* (1993), and Nell Noddings' *Philosophy of Education* (1995), do not even mention Isocrates. The standard educationist history of education, "a classic of its kind" (Boyd, 1966, p. v), is Boyd's *The History of Western Education*, which mentions Isocrates in passing without discussing his educational ideas. Boyd does not discuss the historical influence of Isocrates even in those cases where it is especially well attested by both ancient sources and modern

scholarship. As I have argued elsewhere, these texts are wholly inaccurate (as well as parochial) in almost every important respect, and of no use to anyone seeking an accurate understanding of the history of education or educational thought (Muir, 1996, 1998).

What we have, in other words, is not a disagreement between educationists and classicists concerning Isocrates' importance. Educationists have not discussed or questioned the Isocratic tradition that presently dominates the academic study of education because, as their scholarly writings clearly demonstrate, they simply are not aware that it exists. As Raymond Aron rightly observed, "Cultural traditions are the more imperious for being the less conscious" (1968, p. 72). This may seem (and I regret that it may seem) to be a harsh thing to say, but it must honestly be brought to light if educationists and the discipline of educational philosophy are to recover some of the intellectual and academic credibility they have lost in this century. One of the most important tasks for contemporary educational theorists will be to return to the history of educational thought, and to recover some understanding of how very little Plato or Aristotle in fact influenced educational theory or practice, and how pervasive the influence of their rival, Isocrates, continues to be. This paper is intended to be a small part of such a recovery.

Let me mention just one illustration of the theoretical and practical importance of recovering an awareness of the Isocratic tradition, and of the Socratic alternative to it. One historical question which requires re-examination, and which can clarify some of the distinguishing features of the Isocratic and the Socratic traditions, is how the education of women was understood within each tradition. According to Isocrates, education is valued as preparation for political life, women do not participate in politics, and there is therefore no reason for women to be educated. Unfortunately, it has also become something of a "postmodern" commonplace to accuse Plato of educational "sexism," although there are occasional attempts to accuse him of "feminism" as well (Annas, 1976). These accusations are based (when they are based on anything at all) on the Plato of the textbooks, rather than on what Plato has written. We need to recall that Plato's Academy was the one ancient school of philosophy which welcomed women equally with men, and that this is clearly attested to by a number of ancient sources (Diogenes Laertius, 3.46; Clemens Alexandrius, *Stromata*, 4.19, 302; Themistius, *Sophistes* 295c). Plato's

writings, and the historical evidence, reveal to us how futile it is to try to imprison serious educational philosophy within the superficial dichotomous categories imposed by the political doctrines of modern educational advocates<sup>1</sup>. Socratic educational thought provides arguments for the education of women which we in the 20th century have spent nearly half a century trying to re-invent, and still have not yet fully articulated (Muir, 1999).

### *The Isocratic Idea of Education*

Isocrates' educational thought is the most influential in Western education, though the nature and merits of that influence have rarely been examined. Isocrates had much to say about almost every facet of educational thought and practice. Although he was concerned with Athenian educational reform, he was primarily concerned with a philosophical examination and articulation of what he considered to be the universal properties of education; that is, in his view, of what it is that all education, everywhere, has in common. He did not deny or regret that there is a very great diversity in educational thought and practice, but sought to discover what commonalities there may be in the practice of education understood as a human enterprise, one in which the whole of the human species engages.

It is in the context of this philosophical search for universal features of education that Isocrates observed that, in theory and in practice, all education is wholly determined by how two philosophical questions are answered:

- (1) What is the value of education ?
- (2) What method do we use to decide what the value of education ought to be?

These two questions are, according to Isocrates, *the* primary questions in educational thought and practice. This is a plausible claim. As some contemporary educational theorists, such as Paulo Freire, have reminded us, practical issues such as teaching methods, classroom discipline, or the content of teaching texts very much depend on prior conceptions of the value of the human person. Similarly, the aims of education, such as literacy, are given specific content according to prior conceptions of the just society (see below). Normative questions are primary in education because all else in educational thought and practice is determined by the answers given to such questions.

Isocrates' answer to these two questions constitutes the Isocratic idea of the universal nature of education. He argued that education is valued as a means for providing the student with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions specified by the prevailing political doctrine. The method used to define the value of education, therefore, proceeds in three steps: first, one begins from the normative prescriptions of the political doctrine to which one is committed; second, one gives those prescriptions educational expression; and, third, one determines how such prescriptions are to be implemented through the curriculum, teaching methods, institutional design, and so on. In other words, the Isocratic idea of the nature of education is this: the normative intentions of education are derived deductively from political doctrine. Isocrates argued that education is a political enterprise, and that our conception of the value of education therefore will be, and ought to be, derived from a political doctrine to which we are committed prior to making any educational judgement.

An example may clarify Isocrates' argument, and particularly his *method* of deciding the value of education. We can observe, for example, that in the industrialized world of recent history all education has formal goals, such as literacy, learning to read and write. For example, the formal goal of literacy is common to both Nazi Germany and contemporary Canada<sup>2</sup>. Clearly, however, the specific content of the aim "literacy," the proper means of teaching it, and especially the terms in which it was valued, were understood very differently in the two countries. This may seem plain enough, even obvious. Isocrates' intention, however, was to discover if differences of this kind, between two very different conceptions of the value of literacy and education, might be caused by a more fundamental conception of education and value common to both regimes.

In other words, Isocrates sought to discover whether there was a universal idea of the nature of education that was common to all conceptions of educational value and so caused such diversity. In this example, we can see that there are two causes of the difference in the way that literacy was valued. There is, first, the obvious difference between the two political doctrines, Nazism and Canadian democracy, which causes the derivative difference between the two corresponding conceptions of the value of literacy. There is, however, a second and more fundamental cause, namely, a shared conception of the nature of education, and specifically of the political nature of educational

value: democrats and Nazis both presuppose that education is a political enterprise, to be valued relative to criteria derived from political doctrine. Differences in political commitment can cause differences in educational value *only* when this conception of education is assumed. The normative difference between contemporary Canadian and Nazi German education is, therefore, caused by the combination of the shared belief that the normative intention of education is relative to political doctrine, and the radically different political doctrines adhered to in each regime. The shared conception of the political nature of educational value is the more fundamental cause because the differences in political doctrine would have no educational consequence without it.

Within the Isocratic tradition of educational thought that has prevailed in the West, and still prevails today (especially among those who are otherwise attempting to critique the intellectual heritage of the West), the different conceptions of educational value are secondary to, and in fact arise only because of, an (almost) universally presupposed Isocratic conception of education as a political enterprise, in the service of political goals, and valued according to standards derived from political doctrines.

### *Questioning the Isocratic Idea of Education*

If the Isocratic idea of the political nature of education, including the notion that the value of education ought to be defined relative to a political doctrine, is to be justified, one must establish at least two claims. First, one must establish that a specific political doctrine is justified. Second, and more fundamentally, one must establish that education does not have its own unique normative intentions, and therefore that the derivation of the normative intentions of education from political doctrine (or any other doctrine external to education, such as religion) is necessary. The Isocratic tradition provides no such arguments.

Consider first the claim that the derivation of the normative intentions of education from political doctrine can be justified on the grounds that the political doctrine in question is justified. No political doctrine can claim to be justified in a manner acceptable to all those who honestly examine it, for two reasons. First, there are internal variations within any one political doctrine, none of which are regarded as fully justified even by those who in general adhere to the

doctrine in question. Advocates of democracy, for example, can be divided into egalitarians and libertarians, conservatives and radicals, partisans of participatory and representative decision-procedures, and so on, each party leaning upon the familiar ploy of despotic rhetoric, namely, the claim that their particular definition constitutes "true" democracy. Second, even if there were agreement amongst advocates of any particular political doctrine concerning its detailed components and justifiability, it would not follow that such a doctrine was justified. The political world presents us with a variety of political doctrines. The justifiability of Western democracy and human rights are challenged by advocates of Albanian and Korean communism, a variety of theologico-political doctrines, some versions of "free market" economics, and resurgent nationalism, both within and outside the West. If no political doctrine can claim to be fully justified, then the corresponding justifiability of the deductive derivation of the normative intentions of education from *any* axiomatic political doctrine is unestablished.

The unjustifiability, and the consequent contestability, of political doctrines has led some educationists to the dogmatic conclusion that education ought therefore to be valued in such a way as to represent a diversity of political doctrines, though the directness of "political doctrine" is sometimes rhetorically disguised by more fashionable labels such as values or cultures. R.S. Peters, for example, although he knew nothing of the Isocratic legacy (Muir, 1996, 1998) advocated a variation of the originally Isocratic assumption "that 'education' is an essentially contested concept, and will be used in different ways according to people's ideologies" (Peters, 1983, pp. 42-43; see also Aronowitz & Giroux (1985) for a more contemporary, but even less argued, conformity to the same traditional Western idea, though from the opposite political perspective).

If we think with a little more precision, however, we will soon see that the assertions that education is an "essentially contested" concept, and that a normative "diversity" of educational practice is a consequence of this of this, are false.

To begin to see why Peters' assertion is both factually false and logically careless, let us look more closely at his assertion. The first clause in the assertion constitutes a claim about the "essential," or universal, nature of education, namely, that it is "contested." The second clause consists of the assertion that the concept "education" is

used in a way which is determined by the users "ideology" (the vagueness of fashionable jargon being a feature of Peters' largely unargued texts). The two clauses are, unfortunately, connected in an ambiguous way by the word "and:" this word could mean "and consequently," or "and this means that it," or a combination of both. Whichever way we interpret the connective, however, the error remains the same: the *value* of education can be contested in these ideological terms only if, and only because, the *concept* education is *not* "essentially contested" but rather regarded as essentially and universally political. In other words, the concept "education" can be used differently according to people's ideologies if and only if education is without contestation believed to be an essentially ideological concept by all parties. It follows that Peters' version of popular conception of the "the essentially contested nature of education" is merely a consequence of a more fundamental and unarticulated conformity to a universal and uncontested conception of the nature of education; specifically, that education is an essentially political enterprise, such that the value of education is defined relative to *political* doctrine. This is the traditional, and still effectively universal and unquestioned, understanding of the nature of education in the West.

In contemporary educational thought and practice, education is not an essentially contested concept. On the contrary, the disagreement, and therefore the apparent diversity of opinion about the value of education, is wholly restricted to the nature of the political doctrine (or ideology) from which the normative intentions of education are to be derived. No diversity exists with respect to the underlying and quite uncontested concept of the supposedly political nature of education: indeed, all the contesting parties accept the traditional Isocratic idea that the normative intentions of education should be derived from political doctrine, and implicitly (and especially in practice) exclude philosophical alternatives (which will be discussed below). Political diversity of educational value – especially in the guise of cultures or values – not only fails to guarantee educational diversity, but in fact prevents it. We will return to this below.

Another, and related, Isocratic assumption is shared by contemporary educationists, two of whom recently asserted that

The main argument for shifting from professional to political control of the broad framework of the curriculum is that questions about the aims and content of the curriculum are intimately connected with views about the kind of society we wish to live in. (O'Hear & White, 1991, p. 10)

This assertion contains a factual and a prescriptive component. It is claimed that education is, as a matter of fact, "connected with" – this being the authors' rhetorical expression of "subordinate to" – opinions about what the good society is. From this 'fact' it follows that political agencies, not educators, ought to control the curriculum. We have here a typical example of so much "radical" educationist argument: these educationists prescribe only what is already prevalent in educational practice, and has been prevalent for more than a century. Moreover, teachers take note: your representatives in the academy are recommending that you ought to be subordinate to politicians and public officials, an arrangement that does not appear to serve either education or educators all that well.

Insofar as there is a factual assertion here, it must be observed that the history of education in fact abounds with individuals such as Socrates, Maimonides, Spinoza, or Pasternak who stood both within and against the politics of their day for the sake of their education, and especially for the sake of their autonomy and pursuit of knowledge. It is not true that education is, as a matter of fact, *necessarily* relative to the kind of society we wish to live in.

Turning to the prescriptive component of this assertion, we must note that even if education is or can be conditionally related to the kind of society we want to live in, a logically prior question concerns the direction of that relationship: do we begin from the valuations and requirements of politics, and from that perspective decide what education ought to be, or do we begin from the valuations and requirements of education, and define the just regime as the one which will protect education from subjection to *any* political doctrine? It is from the perspective of this question that we can begin to articulate the contrast between Isocratic and Socratic educational thought.

From the Isocratic perspective, we would start with a political doctrine which defines our preferred society, and derive the normative intentions of education from it. In this view, education is *a means to* justice, as defined by the prevailing political doctrine.

In contrast, if we start with a Socratic conception of education as a part of a good life in itself (see below), then we would reason in the opposite direction, from a philosophical conception of education to the kind of political regime that would support such education as an enterprise to be valued in terms independent of political valuations. It may be that we want to live in a regime which protects the autonomy of education from politicization generally, and from the derivation of the normative intentions of education from political doctrine specifically. In this view, education is not *a means to justice*, but rather *a measure of justice*: the just regime is the one which protects the autonomy of education, and therewith the independence of the minds of the young.

Neither history nor experience would allow us to deny that almost all education has always been, and for contemporary advocates of *all political persuasions* remains, an enterprise and institution valued as a means for imparting, to the young especially, what is valued from the perspective of a particular political doctrine. The causes of this are various and interconnected, and include both intellectual conceptions of individual flourishing and public justice, and the material forces of academic faddishness, desire for power, class interest, economic ambition, and so on. What I have tried to argue here, however, is that all of these causes, and especially the objectives of the people who act according to them, can be fully understood only in relation to the Isocratic idea of education as a political enterprise which is common to all of them.

The content and universality of the Isocratic tradition needs to be understood within the context of a wider recovery of the history of educational thought and practice, and as a part of the renewal of the intellectual credibility of educational philosophy. It is also a *necessary* part of any thought about practical educational reform (e.g., Finley, 1975). At present, the intellectual landscape of educational thought is littered with radicals, liberals and conservatives, free market enthusiasts and social democrats, libertarians and egalitarians, canonists and multi-culturalists, and so on, all angrily throwing books and newspaper articles at one another, each party outraged that the other is seeking to subject education (and the young) to the wrong political program. They are all children of Isocrates, however, and assume without question that education ought to be political in the first place; they disagree only secondarily, about the identity of the

political program which is to rule education and dominate the minds of the young. From this perspective there is no significant difference between canonists or multiculturalists, or between radicals and conservatives, nor is there any difference between the educators who have opted to serve one or another of these parties. Behind all the ideological rhetoric about making education truly democratic, we have nothing more than the traditional educational struggle between aspiring Isocratic tyrants, who assume that politics is the pinnacle of value and human aspiration. It is from this perspective we turn to the beginning of a recovery of an honest understanding of the lost Socratic idea of education, and to the possibility that the value of education not only can be, but ought to be, defined and valued independently of political doctrine.

### *The Socratic Idea of Educational Value*

Before turning to the structure of Socratic educational thought concerning the value of education, one common misunderstanding must be mentioned. It is still a commonplace of the education textbooks that Plato values education as an enterprise that serves what is supposed to be his "ideal state," ruled by "philosopher-kings," and that as such education is valued in political terms. Little evidence exists to support this claim, and none is provided in the recent education textbooks that perpetuate it (e.g., Boyd, 1952, p. 33; Cahn, 1970, p. 6; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985, p. 62; Gutek, 1988, pp. 17-18; Ozmon & Craver, 1990, p. 17; Gutek, 1997, pp. 20-22 ). There is, in fact, not only little evidence for these claims, but clear evidence against them. The very notion of an "ideal state" does not in fact appear at all in the *Republic*, but rather was introduced into the popular image of Plato by Jowett's widely read translation, in which Plato's *polis* became Jowett's "state" or "city-state," and, consequently, Plato's "city in speech" became Jowett's "ideal state." It is no less than astonishing that this Victorian misrepresentation remains an almost universal feature of educationist textbooks to this day. Similarly, it must be recalled that the regime (or "city-state") is introduced in the *Republic* – the Greek title of which is the much less doctrinal *Politeia* – not as a primary concern, but rather as an image of the human soul which, being larger than the soul, is easier to observe and analyze (*Republic*, 368c ff.). The state is not the object of the discussion, but rather an *image* of the object of the discussion: as the *Apology* makes

very clear, education is preparation for philosophy, and philosophy is a way of life which is an alternative to, and in irreconcilable conflict with, politics. The "justice" that is discussed in the *Republic* is not "political" justice, and still less "personal" justice, but is rather regarded as a *virtue*, an excellence of the rightly ordered human soul. Plato does not value education in political terms, particularly not in the way that Isocrates does.

The difference between the Socratic and Isocratic ideas of the nature of education is a consequence of their shared recognition of *the* most fundamental question in educational thought: What is the source of the normative intentions of education, or, according to what standard do we claim that education is to be valued? The two traditions, however, answer this question very differently. It is not my intention here to fully articulate the whole of Socratic educational thought, even concerning the limited question of educational value, and I will say nothing about Socratic educational practice. My intention is only to outline the structure of the Socratic *method* of deciding what the value of education ought to be, emphasizing points of contrast with the traditional Isocratic method.

As we have seen, Isocratic educational thinkers answer this question with two assertions. First, that we know the best political doctrine, and that we can derive standards of educational value from it. Second, though logically prior, is the assertion that we know that education is political in nature, and so justifiably subject to political valuation. The Socratic philosophers certainly do not deny that, in practice, education can be subjected to standards of value that are derived from political doctrine; indeed, they insist that educators must always understand and resist the temptations of that possibility. They do deny, however, that such subjection has been shown to be either justified or necessary.

The Socratic philosophers approach the question of educational value by asking whether the universal features of education can be shown to be the basis of a justified conception of value wholly internal to education. In other words, they ask whether there is a conception of value which is unique to education and to be discovered within education itself. Their reasoning proceeds as follows, in four steps.

First, to use politics as an illustration, we recall from Plato's *Apology*, or from the first book of the *Politeia*, that we can find some features common to all political doctrines, or some of the universal

features of all political life. In all regimes, for example, there is some diversity of political opinion, even if this diversity is restricted to differences between interpretations of the implications of a shared religion or founding document (such as a Constitution). Beginning from the very diversity of political opinion, we can discover that we all have opinions about what the best political doctrine is, but that none of us can demonstrate that we *know* the best political doctrine, or (in the example of democracy) that we *know* what equality or freedom or justice for all really are. There are still some, to be sure, who will assert that no such knowledge is possible at all. We know by now, though, that this self-contradictory dogma is a rhetorical expression of the old Thracymachean assertion that we *know* that “justice” is the name of the preferences of the powerful, and that this constitutes a peculiarly absolutist political doctrine in its own right (see Stern, 1955/1992).

We do not know what justice is, but neither do we know that knowledge of human justice is impossible. All we know is that there is a question, that in some form all people can ask this question about their own situation, and that none of us know the answer to it. The question is, What is justice? It is a question raised by human experience itself, and common to every human being (and perhaps to species beyond this). Politics is everywhere and always guided by the *opinion* that we know the answer to this question, and by the *opinion* that, to some degree, we know how to implement our answer in practice. In contrast to this political mode of decision and discourse, the first step in determining the value of higher education, according to Socratic educational thought, is our discovery of our *knowledge* of two things: first, that the question of what human justice is can be asked by all of us, and, second, that we do not have knowledge of what justice is. In other words, where Isocratean educational thought begins from a political opinion about what justice is, Socratic educational thought begins with universal *questions*.

The identity and status of such questions are, of course, a matter for genuine disagreement. What the Socratic educational thinkers have in mind are those few questions which are common to human experience as such, and not limited to any particular time or place (or “culture,” to use a peculiarly European, indeed Eurocentric, term increasingly challenged by precisely those non-European civilizations upon whom the term has been inflicted by Western academics – Muir,

1998). I have limited my discussion above to political questions, but there are others, such as, Is there a divinity (or supernatural or spiritual)? The various *answers* given to such questions define and distinguish religions, cultures, and regimes from one another, though, in the Socratic view, the *questions* are the same. The first step in the Socratic method of deciding the value of education is the discovery of such common questions, which can in principle always be asked by any human being.

The second step begins with the observation that we know that there are a diversity of opinions, or answers to such fundamental questions. I will continue to use the example of the question of what justice is. In Socratic education, these opinions are not first examined with the intention of deciding which is true or best, and certainly not with the intention of committing ourselves to one such opinion before we have understood it or considered its consequences for ourselves *and others*. The opinions are first examined in order to ascertain what question they are intended to answer. One then endeavors to determine which questions are universal, and common to all human beings, and to distinguish these from questions which are ephemeral or are superficial. There is no denying that this a very difficult mode of thought, and that making such distinctions is difficult. The following example, then, might show how it is sometimes possible.

Western (and probably other) universities are filled with advocates of a variety of political opinions, all of them identical in their eagerness to provide (and disseminate) a corresponding variety of political doctrines as answers to this question: Which political doctrine ought to be the source of the normative intentions of education?

The apparent urgency of this question, and the academic cottage industry that has been built around it, should not intimidate us so much that we fail to ask whether it is a fundamental, *human*, question. With this in mind, the Socratic educational thinker observes that this question needs to be answered if *and only if* a logically prior question either must be, or justifiably can be, answered in the affirmative. That question is: Is education necessarily or justifiably a political enterprise at all, such that the value of education must be relative to political doctrine?

Clearly, if the answer to this question is no, then thinking about the secondary Socratic question of *which* political doctrine ought to

be selected is both philosophically misguided, and in practice the foundation of unjustifiable acts of political control of learning and thought. The question of whether education ought to be valued according to political standards at all is therefore more fundamental than the question of which political standard ought to be used. This argument helps us to see that the question of which political doctrine will determine the value of education is not a universal one, but rather arises only where the Isocratic idea of the nature of education is presupposed. Moreover, the argument helps us to see that the question of what the value of education ought to be is a universal question, one which must be asked by any human being who thinks about education.

The third step in Socratic thinking about educational value, after we know some of the permanent human questions, and have distinguished such questions from the questions that can seem so urgent only within the limited horizon of our passing concerns, is to discover how we can go about trying to understand and answer such questions without political (or other forms of) presupposition. Our most direct access to such questions, and to the most profound alternative answers, is ultimately through learning and thinking about the diversity of opinions that have been offered by others.

Two caveats, however, must at this point be placed on the path before us. First, I do not intend to assert that the *correct* answers to our questions are to be found in any of the opinions we have before us already, although that is certainly possible. I am suggesting only that without knowledge of other opinions, *and especially of the reasons and arguments for them*, we are likely only to re-invent what others have already said, or to limit our thinking within the opinions we and our regime already have – two very common features of recent educational thought as it is. Learning about the opinions and arguments of others is of no value, and can even indeed be nothing but pretension, unless we accept and celebrate the possibility that our opinions are wrong, and that the opinions we encounter in others may be correct.

The second caveat has to do with the fact that one of our best sources of alternative thought and opinion is books, and this may appear to associate my argument with the conservative (or, as I would say, perhaps unfairly, the reactionary) “Great Books” cult of M.J. Adler, E.D. Hirsh, and the rest, for whom the contents of “great books”

bestow a kind of necessary substrate of tradition and disposition upon the thought and sentiments of young citizens<sup>3</sup>. Nothing could be more distant from my intention. It is true that reading books of great influence or of enduring merit – if we have the courage and openness to read them in their own terms, and not through the fine-mesh sieve of currently approved academic methods and valuations, too often now *the* disguise for incompetence – can provide us with clearer understanding of the questions we face, and of some of the alternative answers available. There are some such books which, if we were as “open” in thought as we are in rhetoric, might compel us to ask ourselves about the historical origins and veracity of Eurocentric political concepts such as “socially constructed,” “self,” “culture,” “deconstruction,” “free market,” and so on. Similarly, anyone who wishes to understand the question of the value of education must begin with Socrates and Isocrates, just as one who wishes to understand the relation between reason and revelation must read at least the works of al-Farabi, Moses ben Maimon, and Thomas Aquinas. By reading such books can we discover some of the fundamental questions, and thereby begin to free our thought by discovering the historical origins of our now unquestioned opinions, as well as the alternatives to those opinions, and by distinguishing the fundamental questions from the ephemeral questions which arise only on the basis of our dogmas. There is none of this in the Great Books cult.

The fourth step introduces us directly to the Socratic understanding of the value of education. As Plato's cave (*Republic*, 514a) reminds us, those who think of themselves and the world within the concepts and values of their own time and place are the puppets of other people's ideas. Only by enquiring into the origins of, *arguments for and against*, and alternatives to, these ideas, can we acquire two kinds of knowledge that cannot be acquired in any other human activity, and certainly not within the parameters of political life: first, self-knowledge, or knowledge of the fundamental questions and of the answers which predominate in our time and place, and, second, knowledge of the alternatives that, sometimes, can challenge our opinions in ways that are painful to us. Any thug can have the confidence to adhere to, and the assertiveness to express, their opinions. Very few people, however, have the intellectual and moral courage that genuine questioning of their own opinions demands, and contemporary academic (especially educational) discourse is cluttered

with bits of rhetoric – “self esteem,” “cultural identity,” “patriotism,” or “economic necessity,” for example – that try to give a moralizing veneer to our lack of such courage. Despite all the academic talk (revealingly, often in the mode of self-praise) about our “openness” to alternative opinions and perspectives, there is remarkably little such openness and courage, and even less diversity of any substance.

For this reason, and because we cannot examine our own opinions alone, we need true friends who can provide both support and *dialectical* conversation. In other words, the shared search for knowledge of the most fundamental questions, and of the most profound answers entrusted to our care in friends and in books, is an education which is valuable because it provides us with knowledge of ourselves – knowledge of our ignorance – and the preconditions of free thought, and thereby provides the basis of the most enduring and self-sufficient form of human community. That community is not the political community, nor can it ever be, but is rather another mode of human community, the philosophic community, and a part of the goal for which education is valued.

The philosophic community is not a political community, and indeed will always find itself in some tension with the regime, and with the wider political community it finds itself within. It is an educational community, comprised of friends not in search of power, or self-affirmation, or choice, but in a communal search for knowledge of the good, the true, and the beautiful. Such a fragile community is *always* endangered, not merely by the political community, but especially by those for whom politics is primary, and who would compel education (and therefore educators) to be the servant of the political doctrine which defines the aspirations of the various contestants for power within the regime, and their academic deputies. The permanent tension between wisdom and power is not honorably resolved by such servitude, especially in a democracy.

### *Conclusion*

The question of the value of education is a permanent one discovered when Isocrates, Plato, Xenophon, and Aristotle wrote about the relation between philosophy and politics, and therefore about the *permanent* conflict which exists between education and the opinions which dominate in the regime. Nothing in modern thought has changed this question and conflict, and the traditional and now

dogmatic belief that education must be valued relative to political doctrine remains unquestioned. Indeed, when the politicization of education is challenged, the partisans of *all* political doctrines respond to the questioner by asserting that he or she *must* be motivated by a political agenda of some kind, as if no other mode of valuation were even possible. Let me then emphasize that my intention here is to argue that education can be an autonomous enterprise, and ought not to be subjected to the valuations of *any* political doctrine. I am, therefore, not arguing against any particular political doctrine, nor I am arguing against any general category of political opinion, such as "Left" or "Right." I am arguing against the advocates of any and all political persuasions, to the extent that they propose that education is political in nature, and so to be valued relative to a political doctrine. Such advocates now dominate educational debate, and an alternative to their shared Isocratic assumptions is necessary.

Although further thought and study may show us that there are others, the history of educational thought gives us only two conceptions of the value of education, and two methods for deciding what that value will be. In the dominant Isocratic tradition, education is valued as a means for ensuring that students acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are valued according to a political doctrine to which we are committed before we begin our educational deliberations. The method of deciding educational value, in this view, is deductive derivation from an axiomatic political doctrine. In the alternative Socratic tradition, education is valued as a means of preparing the student for free and independent thought about the very few universal human questions, and for participation in the philosophic community devoted to shared enquiry about such questions. The method of deciding the value of education begins with the observation of the diversity of (and often the conflict between) our opinions, discovers the human questions and our ignorance of them, and finally proceeds to the self-knowledge and dispositions that are required by the pursuit of knowledge of answers to those questions. Politics and philosophy are the two alternative sources of educational value, and it is very doubtful whether they can ever be wholly reconciled. The tragedy of contemporary educational thought is that the philosophical alternative is no longer permitted to be part of the debate.

From this perspective we can see that the fact that we can witness a struggle for the Humanities curriculum, in which political activists of the Right compete with activists of the Left, ought not to persuade us that there is any diversity of opinion concerning the question of educational value. Real diversity of opinion is not sought, nor is it tolerated, by any of these activists, Left or Right. On the contrary, all of them share two dogmas, in definitively Western form, in the service of Western (albeit academic) political agendas: first, that the normative intentions of education ought to be relative to political doctrine, and in the service of political goals; second, and consequently, that the alternative philosophical conception of educational value – about which they have only the most second-hand and hazy awareness – must be regarded with suspicion because (it is assumed) it *must* be covertly based on an unacknowledged political doctrine.

The ironic, perhaps tragic, consequence of today's version of the politicization of education has been lamented by thinkers on the radical Right, such as Jacques Derrida, the neo-conservative Right, such as Harvey Mansfield, and the left-wing of liberalism, such as Richard Rorty. All of them have observed that the university is increasingly composed of dogmatic political coterie, disengaged from the real political life of their regimes, unrepresentative of the political opinions of their fellow citizens, and, as a result, impotent in the face of the slow drift toward an unprincipled version of oligarchy largely directed by corporate interests. This default may be the real educational consequence of the politicized academy, and of the activist academics *on the Left and on the Right* who have conformed to the belief, always dominant in capitalist democracies, that politics and economics are more important (not to mention of higher academic and social status) than education.

I have suggested that there is tragedy here. It seems to me, as it seemed to Socrates, that democracy is the one regime which can maintain a truly autonomous educational enterprise, *and* make such education available to all who desire it. And if we were inclined to look with open minds, history shows that the Socratic conception of education has existed, albeit on the margins of education, for 2000 years; it has been treasured by men and women, by Europeans, Africans, and Arabs, by Muslims, Christians and Jews, by rich and poor. The real practical question, I fear, is whether the political

dogmatists will tolerate even discussion of such education in our universities, and the threat to their monopoly of educational thought that such discussion will represent. We can begin to challenge their intolerance, and to revitalize the study of the history and philosophy of education in spite of it, only by returning to philosophical and historical reflection on the question of *educational* value.

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#### NOTES

1. Aristotle seems to be the exception.
2. I have chosen the contrast between Nazism and Canadian democracy because it is unambiguous and familiar to most readers, and because it is less distractingly emotive than a more contemporary contrast between, say, "multiculturalists" and "canonists." I trust that no one will conclude that I regard the political doctrines equal in merit, or that "educational diversity" implies inclusion of both.
3. I should say that while I have my disagreements with the Straussian version of Great Books education, especially as articulated by the (still notorious) Allan Bloom, I would not at all include them in what I referred to as "the Great Books cult." Bloom himself, in fact, harshly disassociated himself from the educational proposals of Adler and Hirsh.

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