

Education as the Recapitulation of Sense-Making Techniques

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Two general ideas have dominated educational thinking during this century. The first and most persistently influential derives from Plato. In this scheme, we must first get clear what we mean by education and what its end will look like. We must then design a curriculum that will carry the child to that end from ignorance and conventional confusions by means of those forms of knowledge that encourage, or entail, the growth of rationality and its power to expose the truth about reality. Each step of the process is determined by our sense of the end - the nature of reality, and of the true, the good, and the beautiful. The curriculum is the causal dynamic that carries the educational process forward. Internalizing the contents of the curriculum, that is, causes the forming of the rational mind.

The second idea was given its most influential expression by Rousseau. He saw it as complementing Plato's. Rousseau argued that the stages of the journey to educated adulthood have distinctive characters of their own that need to be brought to their own perfection or ripeness. Childhood, for example, should not be seen merely as the beginning of a process, a stage defined by ignorance, confusion, and the lack of educated rationality. Childhood has its own form of perfection to whose ripening we must carefully attend. In Rousseau's scheme, the causal dynamic of the educational process is the natural growth or ripening experience of the child to which knowledge must be made to conform if it is to be effectively and usefully learned.

These two ideas have not, however, come easily together. Often enough they have been seen less as complementary insights than as incompatible. Plato's and Rousseau's arguments have so profoundly influenced western thinking about education that they have provided the terms, perhaps also the polarities, of the major educational debates of this century. The trouble is that it is difficult to think of education as a process of potentials ripening according to natural predispositions and at the same time as the accumulation and internalization of knowledge and its logics. It is a bit like the rabbit's or duck's head perception trick. Which is the figure and which the ground? It is as though focusing on the causal role of knowledge or of developing experience inhibits us from perceiving that of the other.

This polarization results, of course, from something of a caricature of Plato's and Rousseau's ideas. It suppresses Plato's sensitivity