



What is Education?: Re-reading Metaphysics in Search of Foundations

Angus Brook

The aim of this article is in principle very simple: to ask the question ‘what is education?’ in light of Heidegger’s claim that “being is always the being of an entity”,¹ an ontological principle itself derived from Aristotle’s claim in the *Metaphysics* that the primary sense of being is *ousia*.² It appears, at least on the surface, a simple task and yet becomes very difficult past the mere assertion that in some sense this claim must have some relevance to what we mean by education. In this article, I will attempt to re-read this basic metaphysical principle as a way of investigating the ontological foundations of the activities of educating and being educated in the being of humans.

It is first necessary, however, to provide some introductory cautions and qualifications about how the article will proceed. The first qualification worthy of note is that this article is not intended to be an in-depth or technical exposition of Aristotle’s, Aquinas’, or Heidegger’s arguments about the meaning of being. This would be a task beyond the scope of this article and I would certainly not claim to be able to achieve this end. Rather, it is the aim of this article to provide an introductory, and hopefully user-friendly, discussion of a basic metaphysical principle; that being is always the being of an entity, as a way of disclosing the ontological foundation of education.

Additionally, it is also necessary to acknowledge that the article is not intended to be an exhaustive or complete exploration of the meaning of education, even within the limited scope of the ontological foundations of educating and being educated. Rather, the article will be merely exploratory, providing a brief but hopefully cogent sketch of what education means in relation to the being of human entities.

With these qualifications in place let me briefly state at the outset what the article will attempt to claim. It is my intent to use this article to assert and reinterpret the claim that the fundamental meaning of education is ‘to become a fully flourishing human’, or, to seek and attain a mature or adult human life; a life of ‘eudemonia’ as Aristotle

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Macquarrie and Robinson (trans.) (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 29.

² Aristotle, ‘Metaphysics’, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Vol.2, Jonathan Barnes (ed.) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) 1028^a9–31.

might say. Further, I will also attempt to justify the claim that humans by nature require education, or, that we can't talk meaningfully about being a human without also at the same time talking about being educated and educator. I will provide an ontological justification for these claims through an analysis and in-depth re-interpretation of what it means to say in metaphysics that "being is always the being of an entity".

1. What it Means to Say that Being is Always the Being of an Entity

In the early stages of *Being and Time* Heidegger states succinctly that "being is always the being of an entity" as the first layer of his answer to the question of the meaning (*sinn*) of being.³ This claim, as such, sits at the point of origin for Heidegger's attempt to come to terms with the meaning of being and serves as a kind of self-evident or first principle for his ontological system.

This claim sits very comfortably, in many respects, with the long history and tradition of metaphysics all the way back to Aristotle's argument in book IV the *Metaphysics* that although being can be said in many ways, it has reference to one central meaning, or reference to one definite kind of thing.⁴ Of course, this central meaning; this reference to one definite kind of thing is later, in book VII, identified as *ousia* (generally translated as substance).⁵ Here, Aristotle claims that while there are several senses in which a thing is said to be, substance is primary in every case.⁶ So, the question remains: what does it mean to say that the primary sense of being is *ουσια*, or, alternatively, that being is always the being of an entity?

The first thing that can be said is that for Aristotle substance signifies the unified identity of particular entities (or real individuals) in the world. We find evidence for this in Aristotle's rejection of matter as the meaning of substance, where he states: "both separability and individuality are thought to belong chiefly to substance".⁷ In the first instance, then, substance signifies the unified identity of an entity that allows it to be separated or distinguished from other entities.⁸

³ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 29.

⁴ Aristotle, 'Metaphysics', 1003^a32–34.

⁵ Translating *ουσια* as substance can be quite misleading as in English we often mean by substance stuff or material which is certainly not what Aristotle meant by *ουσια*. *ουσια* is an abstract noun derived from the verb 'ειναι' – 'to be'. For Aristotle, substance is the technical term for something that exists in its own right as a unified whole with a particular identity. This is why scholars will sometimes translate *ουσια* as subsistence.

⁶ Aristotle, 'Metaphysics', 1028^a31–32.

⁷ Aristotle, 'Metaphysics', 1029^a27–28.

⁸ John A. Vella, *Aristotle: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London, Continuum, 2008) 38.

Equally, substances (at least in the primary sense) are always individual and independent.⁹ Likewise, Aristotle claims in the *Metaphysics* that substance signifies the individually existing things of which reality is composed.¹⁰ Substance, therefore, is the unified identity of particular things, e.g., being is always the being of an entity.

However, what Aristotle means by substance is difficult to ascertain, and is certainly hotly debated in current academic scholarship.¹¹ The main reason for this ambiguity is Aristotle's hylomorphism; his thesis that physical (changing and moving) entities are unified composites of matter (*hyle*) and form (*morphe*) which move from potentiality to actuality (principle to end). Certainly, when Aristotle comes to deal with substance as the primary sense of being in book VII of the *Metaphysics* he must necessarily address the question of what substance means; matter, form, or their composite?

In one sense, it would appear at the outset that it must be the form of the entity that is the primary sense of being, for matter is certainly not, and Aristotle quickly denies the primacy of the composite on the ground that the composite is posterior and therefore fails to meet the criteria of primary meaning.¹² Likewise, form is frequently defined by Aristotle to be the 'end' or actuality of an entity; actuality being more primary than potentiality.¹³ So, it would seem that form is the primary sense of substance, and there is certainly a great deal of scholarly support for this claim.¹⁴ On the other hand, this definition of substance as form sits uneasily with Aristotle's frequent claims that substance means first and foremost the reality and identity of individually existing or real entities.

What it is important to note, for the purposes of this paper, is that Aristotle's attempt to solve this ambiguity gives rise to two intrinsically related senses of substance; the first and primary being that of the unified whole individual entity, the next is what often gets called 'secondary substance'. Substance, in the primary sense, is the actualised form of a particular entity, whether it is composed of matter (a composite primary substance) or not. Secondary substance signifies the form qua universal characteristics or properties which can be analogously said of many differing things. This includes such secondary substances as species, genus, and other universal forms.

For Aristotle, then, there are only two primary ways of talking about being; the first is the being of an individual entity, the second,

⁹ Christopher Shields, *Aristotle* (London: Routledge, 2007) 172–175.

¹⁰ Aristotle, 'Metaphysics', 999^a25–26.

¹¹ Shields, *Aristotle*, 256.

¹² Aristotle, 'Metaphysics', 1029^a30–31.

¹³ See Aristotle's 'Physics' and 'Metaphysics', 191^b27–28, 1014^b–16–1017^b25, 1050^a15–16.

¹⁴ Shields, *Aristotle*, 263–265.

the universal formal characteristics or properties that can be said to belong to entities qua being that kind of entity.¹⁵ Being, therefore, is always the being of an entity; either the individual entity or the universal characteristics of being an entity.

2. Aquinas on Being

Having restated and clarified the basic ontological principle in Aristotle's philosophy that being is always the being of an entity I would like to briefly visit the metaphysical arguments of St. Thomas Aquinas in order to pad out and unpack further the ontological principle 'that being is always the being of an entity'. Here, I would suggest, Aquinas adds through expansion and qualification two important ways of constituting this principle that are important for any consideration of being and education. The first is Aquinas' determination of being as 'esse' (as a verb) instead of an abstract noun (as in Aristotle), while the second is Aquinas' supplementary argument that being can also be said to be relationships between entities in community.

Aquinas, as it is commonly known, was thoroughly Aristotelian and yet not simply a commentator on Aristotle. In many respects, Aquinas took Aristotle's philosophy as the correct point of origin for philosophy, as metaphysics, and then improved and innovated on Aristotle's own arguments through a synthesis with other philosophical systems, such as Neo-Platonism.¹⁶

A key example of this is Aquinas' determination of being as 'esse'; a verb signifying the 'act of existence'.¹⁷ The point of origin for this argument can be found in one of Aquinas' early texts, 'On Being and Essence', in which he argues that essence signifies that the being of the entity "is ordered to the thing's proper activity, and nothing is without a proper activity".¹⁸ Later, in his *Commentary on Aristotle's Interpretation*, Aquinas argues that "for 'is' said simply, signifies to be in act, and therefore signifies in the mode of a verb".¹⁹ Further, in

¹⁵ Aristotle, 'Categories' in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Vol.1, Jonathan Barnes (ed.) (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984) 2^a11–2^b29.

¹⁶ Ralph McInerny, *A First Glance at St. Thomas Aquinas: A Handbook for Peeping Thomists* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

¹⁷ William Norris Clarke, 'Introduction', *An Introduction to the Metaphysics of St. Thomas Aquinas*, James F. Anderson (trans.) (Washington, Regnery Publishing, 1997) xv–xvi.

¹⁸ Thomas Aquinas, 'On Being and Essence', in *Selected Writings*, Ralph McInerny (trans.) (London, Penguin Books, 1998) p. 31.

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, 'On the Teacher', in *Selected Writings*, Ralph McInerny (trans.) (London, Penguin Books, 1998) p. 480.

the *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas argues that being properly signifies something's being in act.²⁰

To say that being is the act of existing, or the activity of existing, has radical implications for how we think about the being of an entity. To begin with, to talk of being as the act of existence transforms the way we think of the being of entities from a static abstract noun; which is arguably Aristotle's position,²¹ to a notion that being an entity intrinsically involves particular activities that constitute that entity as an individual,²² that exists within a particular context or environment, and that will share in generic activities along with other entities of the same kind of being.²³

There are other important implications of the claim that being signifies the activity of existing. For instance, Aquinas' notion of being allows for a more fluid and organic view of hylo-morphism, in that what Aristotle meant by form can now be represented as the organisation of physical bodies for the purpose of engaging in and fulfilling particular activities.²⁴ Moreover, Aquinas' formulation of being as the activity of existence also solves the implicit problem in Aristotle about when an entity can be said to be truly that kind of entity; which is especially a problem with living things. So, whereas Aristotle will implicitly view entities that have not fulfilled or actualised their being as somewhat ambiguous in status, Aquinas' argument allows of talk of the being of something even without complete or perfect actualisation. In the most general way, Aquinas is arguing that the being of something can't really be thought of as a static unchanging kind of thing. Instead, being is an 'activity', a verb, an actuality (it shows or gives itself in a certain way), or action (these are the actions or activities of this kind of entity)

The second key implication of Aquinas' determination of being as 'esse' is the notion of the community of being or being in general. As with 'esse', we find Aquinas writing about community in one of his earliest texts 'On Being and Essence' in which he states that "unity and community are of the very meaning of universal".²⁵ In one sense, then, 'ens commune' signifies the very same thing that Aristotle meant by being qua being, or the question of what we mean by being in the most general sense, as evidenced in the prologue to Aquinas'

²⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (Notre Dame, Ave Maria Press, 1981) *Ia Q5, Art.1, Reply Objection 1.*

²¹ Shields, *Aristotle*, 265.

²² Thomas Aquinas, 'Disputations, III, de Potentia', quoted in *An Introduction to the Metaphysics of St. Thomas Aquinas*, James F. Anderson (trans.) (Washington, Regnery Publishing, 1997) VII, 3.

²³ William Norris Clarke, 'Introduction', xvii.

²⁴ William Norris Clarke, *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 2001) 94–96.

²⁵ Thomas Aquinas, 'On Being and Essence', 39.

Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics.²⁶ However, there is more to the notion of 'ens commune' and 'esse commune' in Aquinas than there is in Aristotle's general notion of being qua being. There is one additional feature of Aquinas' notion of 'esse commune' which is of importance to this paper, namely; the mutual and relational inter-dependence of all individual acts of existence which change and move.

The mutual dependence of all substances (or individual acts of existence) rests ultimately on Aquinas' distinction between self-subsisting existence (*esse subsistens*) and communal being.²⁷ This is a distinction between the kind of being shared in common by all entities in the created universe (*esse commune*) and the kind of being that God has as creator of the universe.²⁸ The important feature of this distinction for the purposes of this paper is that it allows us to talk of the being in common (or community) of entities and additionally, specify some of the features of this being in common in a way not possible in Aristotle.

The first feature of 'being in common' points us towards the communal nature of existence; for insofar as anything exists, it acts;²⁹ every act is an act within a particular horizon of common existence,³⁰ and is therefore situated directly or indirectly in relation to other entities and their activities of existence.³¹ In other words, Aquinas argues that all created entities (physical entities that move and change) participate in a common and communal realm of existence.³² This participation in existence implies, right at the outset, that the existence of entities is communal, which in turn necessarily dictates that existence is relational. Individual entities have their being insofar as

²⁶ Aquinas writes: "Consequently it must be the office of one and the same science to consider separate substance and being in general (*ens commune*). . ." (Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, p. xxx). This mirrors Aristotle's discussion of metaphysics as the study of being qua being.

²⁷ Gregory LaNave, 'God, Creation, and the Possibility of Philosophical Wisdom', *Theological Studies*, 2008, 69.

²⁸ Gregory LaNave, 'God, Creation, and the Possibility of Philosophical Wisdom', 69.

²⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book 1: God*, Anton Pegis (trans.) (London, University of Notre Dame Press, 2009).

³⁰ William Norris Clarke, *The One and the Many*, 94–96.

³¹ There are a number of levels of meaning to the phrase 'particular horizon of common existence'. At one level this simply indicates a conceptual 'common existence'; 'ens commune' – everything that is, shares in common being. However, the phrase also signifies the necessity of a 'universal community' or universe as the horizon or space in which any act may take place. More specifically, the phrase also signifies how something like a planet forms a 'worldly community'; a horizon in which there are various contexts of common existence, whether it be plate tectonics, particular ecosystems or habitats, or with regard to humans; particular societies or communities.

³² Francis J. Caponi, 'Karl Rahner and the Metaphysics of Participation', *Thomist*, 2003, 67.

they have their own identity (act of existence) which is also at the same time relational\communal (differentiating).

A second key feature of being in common is the specific inter-dependency of the act of existence. This feature is nowhere explicitly posited in Aquinas' writings, but is, I would suggest, either implicit in them or a possible extension of his arguments about the character of being of entities. There are two ways of looking at the specific inter-dependency of the act of existence; the first in relation to the mutual dependency of all physical things insofar as they co-exist in community; the second in relation to this inter-dependency in the more explicit sense of the interdependency of all physical things insofar as they move from potentiality to act.³³

It is worthwhile providing a more specific example here to better illustrate the interdependent nature of individual acts of existence. One of my favourites is to think of a seedling; perhaps the seedling of a Morton Bay Fig. Here, it is the general nature of the seedling to grow into a fully grown and beautiful flourishing tree. However, the individual act of existence of a seedling is dependent on a particular horizon of common existence for its flourishing. It depends on the activity of existing of a whole range of other things; rain clouds, other trees, the sun, soil, worms, rivers, birds, etc. . . In turn, the seedling, through its activities becomes an individual act of existence that other entities depend upon for their existence. The particular Morton Bay Fig is an individual act of existence, therefore, that only has its activities of existing inasmuch as there is already a particular horizon of common existence there for it to act within and in relation to. This horizon is one of mutual dependence and forms the framework for the movement of the individual Morton Bay Fig from potentiality to act; from seedling to tree.³⁴

In this sense, the movement of entities from potentiality to act not only occurs within an inter-dependent community, but further, each entity is also specifically dependent upon the act of existences of other entities for their own completion or actuality. The specific inter-dependency of the act of existence adds another layer to our understanding of the original ontological principle, that "being is always the being of an entity". In addition to the notion that being is a unified identity (subsistence) within activities, we now also have the notion that being an entity is an activity which is mutually inter-dependent upon the being of other entities. This mutual inter-dependence of entities in their being forms a third way of talking about

³³ Thomas. Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book 2: Creation*, James Anderson (trans.) (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975) Chapter 54.

³⁴ It is important to note at this point that this mutual interdependence of individual entities applies just as much to rocks, humans, planets, and everything that exists in a similar or analogous way to the example of the Morton Bay Fig.

the being of an entity, namely; that being also signifies the relations of mutual dependency between various differing entities.

It is possible to conclude, on this basis, that when we talk about the basic ontological principle that ‘being is always the being of an entity’ there are three primary inter-related meanings of the principle. The first is that being signifies the activities and actualities (or purposes) that form the unity and identity of the entity as an individually real entity. The second meaning is that when we talk about the being of an entity we may also talk about those activities or characteristics that are expressive of the being of that kind of entity. The third meaning, it follows, is that we can talk about being as the mutually inter-dependent relations that are formed between entities (in their being) insofar as they are moving or changing from potentiality to act.

3. Being and Education

It is now time to show how the basic ontological principle that ‘being is always the being of an entity’ serves as the foundation for what it is to be educated and be an educator in the most general sense. In making this attempt, I will first outline the three general ways in which education is founded on this principle before moving into a more in-depth discussion of the primary sense of education.

Education is an activity that humans engage in and as such must necessarily express something about what and how it is to be human. Having said this, however, I would suggest that education is not merely one of many activities that express the being of humans, nor is education merely an accidental or non-essential feature of being a human. Rather, I would argue that education is intrinsic to human nature inasmuch as we cannot be human without being educated and educator to some degree. As such, the ontological principle that ‘being is always the being of an entity’ can be used to disclose at least three fundamental ways in which education is founded upon being human.

The first way that we can disclose the ontological foundations of education is through the claim that education is an intrinsic purpose or end (actuality) of being human. In this sense, education is an activity that belongs inherently and essentially to the unified identity of being a human entity in some sense. This sense, I would suggest, is our being a rational animal.³⁵ Thus, to say that education is founded

³⁵ I am using reason, rationality, and reasoning in the more traditional metaphysical sense. As such, reasoning involves both the passive capacity for the intuition (*νοῦς*) of being, as well as active reasoning (*λογος*) which includes: discourse, the use of principles to determine action, understanding of causes, self-awareness, and so on. . .

upon being human inherently and essentially signifies that education is fundamental to the in-formation of the human intellect from its state of initial potentiality to varying degrees of act and actuality. I will discuss this primary sense of education in section four of this article.

However, I would argue that this is not the only way that education is founded upon being human, for education is also formal and formational; that is: education expresses and is expressed in some or all of the activities or characteristics that are indicative of the kind of being humans have. In other words, education is an activity of being human that is founded upon and is an expression of universal or common characteristics of being human.

Here, the kind of expressions or universal characteristics I would suggest belong to being human and serve as ontological foundations of education are: the communal or sociable character of human existence, the place of work and leisure in the act of human existence, and finally the task of becoming a functioning and flourishing adult\citizen of a particular community. This is the approach to education taken by most of the Ancient Greek philosophers; in particular Aristotle and Plato. Aristotle's largest surviving discussion of education is found in his *Politics* in which he argues that:

“For, inasmuch as every family is a part of a state, and these relationships are the parts of a family, and the excellence of the part must have regard to the excellence of the whole... children must be trained by education with an eye to the constitution, if the excellences of either of them are supposed to make any difference in the excellences of the state. And they must make a difference: for the children grow up to be citizens...”³⁶

It follows that an important meaning of education is grounded upon the communal or sociable nature of being human, and further, that education is an intrinsic part of the human goal of becoming excellent in community and excellent citizens of society. Likewise, insofar as work and leisure are intrinsic to our activities of being sociable, so too will education be grounded upon the need of humans to learn how to be appropriately leisurely and, through work, contribute to the common good.

Thirdly, and finally, it may also be argued that education is an activity intrinsic to the relationship between being human and other entities. Education, in this sense, is inherently connected to the formation of reasoning in relation to other entities, whether it be the formation of practical reasoning about activities in relation to entities, or the formation of theoretical reasoning about entities. In either case,

³⁶ Aristotle, ‘Politics’, in *Complete Works of Aristotle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) 1260b9–1260b20.

it can be shown that education is founded upon the way in which humans, in our very being, are in relations of mutual inter-dependency and community with other entities in the world.

Education, as such, is grounded upon the way in which humans, in our being, are in community or relationship with the world of entities surrounding us. This relationality is both communal; a matter of coexistence, as well as a matter of inter-dependency; in that we are dependent not only on other humans for our formation, but further, are in mutually dependent relations with other entities which we rely upon for our own individual movement of becoming from potentiality to act. In this, we find such expressions of being human as the positive sciences, both natural and human, and technology. These aspects of education are all grounded on the way in which humans, in our being, have our act of existence in relation to entities in the world.

4. On the Primary Sense of Education as Inherent and Essential to Being Human

It will be the aim of this section of the paper to achieve two things: firstly, to demonstrate that education is inherent and essential to being human, and additionally, to unpack the implications of this for how we consider the meaning of education. To begin with, then, I will provide three arguments demonstrating that education is intrinsic to being human.

Argument 1: Education is Inherent to the Being of Humans as Rational Animals

The being of humans, for the most part throughout the history of the philosophical tradition, has been determined as ‘animal rational’; animal signifying our genus, and rational specifying our essence or differentiating identity from other animals. As Aquinas writes in ‘On Being and Essence’:

“Understood in this sense, a nature or essence can be considered in two ways. First, absolutely, according to its proper meaning. In this sense nothing is true of it except what belongs to it as such; whatever else may be attributed to it, the attribution is false. For example, to Man as Man belong ‘rational’, ‘animal’, and everything else included in his definition; but ‘white’ or ‘black’, or any similar attribute not included in the notion of humanity, does not belong to Man as Man”.³⁷

³⁷ Thomas Aquinas, ‘On Being and Essence’, in *Selected Writings*, Ralph McInerny (trans.) (London, Penguin Books, 1998) 38.

Thus, the act and associated activities of being reasonable or rational is the specific difference that allows us to distinguish between the being of humans and the being of other animals.

Education, without doubt, is inherent in the 'being rational' of humans. For as Aristotle claims in Book VII of his *Politics*, "animals lead for the most part a life of nature... Man has reason... and for this reason nature, habit, reason must be in harmony with one another... (and this)... is the work of education..."³⁸ Likewise, we find in Aquinas' work 'On the Teacher' the argument that education (or learning) involves the movement of the human intellect from its state of potency to the actualisation and proper activity.³⁹ Therefore, it is clear that insofar as education is inherent in the formation of the human intellect, and in turn, that the human intellect is essential to being human, so too must education be inherent; at least in potentiality, to the being of humans as rational animals.⁴⁰

Argument 2: That humans, in Our Being, Require Education (or) that Education is Essential to Achieving our Humanity

That humans, in our very being, require education is clear in the very fact that we are born ignorant and incapable of reasoning well. When this is conjoined with the claim that it is essential to human nature to think, and further, to actually reason well, it also becomes clear that thinking is a goal that we aim to achieve rather than any innate feature we are born with. There is a paradox lying at the heart of what it is to be human; that thinking, and hopefully thinking well, is inherent in all the activities and achievements of those dimensions of life we call essentially human and yet we are born incapable of thinking well. Thus, humans by nature require education inasmuch as education signifies learning how to think well.

Plato's allegory of the cave in book 7 of the *Republic* illustrates this interesting paradox within human nature quite poignantly, for it is Plato's claim that humans are born in a state of enslavement, i.e., we are enslaved to our physical senses and thus are incapable of thinking well.⁴¹ Plato asserts that it is education or formation (*παιδεία*) that frees the human from the chains of ignorance, allowing them to

³⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1332^b4–10.

³⁹ Thomas Aquinas, 'On the Teacher', in *Selected Writings*, Ralph McInerny (trans.) (London, Penguin Books, 1998) 199.

⁴⁰ Charles Hummel, 'Aristotle', *Prospects: the quarterly review of comparative education*, 1993, vol.23, no.1/2, 3.

⁴¹ Plato, 'Republic', in *Complete Works*, John Cooper (ed.) (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing, 1997) 514a.

turn away from appearances to the truths of reason.⁴² Education in this sense, Plato proposes, is a turning of the whole human being (the soul) towards the truths only possible through learning how to think well.⁴³ Therefore, again, it is possible to say that humans by nature require education to fully achieve our humanity (as reasoning entities).

Argument 3: Education is Essential to Living a Fully Flourishing Human Life

Thinking well can't be detached from living a fully flourishing or good human life. This is precisely why Aristotle begins his *Nicomachean Ethics* with the claim that "every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good".⁴⁴ This claim leads us to the classical concept of human *arête*; to excel at being a human. In this sense, the whole purpose of education is not merely to learn about being a human intellectually, but also intrinsically contains the task of becoming an excellent human being. To become an excellent human being, insofar as we can determine the essence of our humanity to be our intellect, then leads to at least three main dimensions of human excellence: (i) of becoming excellent at thinking in general, (ii) of becoming excellent in thinking about human activities, and (iii) becoming excellent in actually achieving the goals or purposes of human life through the use of reason.

This argument can also be looked at from the perspective of natural teleology; that "education is aimed at developing our essential nature by systematically cultivating various capacities with their inbuilt structure and teleology".⁴⁵ In this respect, the goal of being human; eudemonia or happiness, is precisely the same goal as that of education.⁴⁶ This goal is inherently tied up with the formation of practical reason; for it is through reason that a human is able to discover and discern their proper good.⁴⁷ Education, therefore, lies at the core of

⁴² Plato, *Republic*, 514–518b.

⁴³ Plato, *Republic*, 518c.

⁴⁴ Aristotle, 'Nicomachean Ethics', the *Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol.2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) 1094^a1.

⁴⁵ John Haldane, 'Metaphysics in the Philosophy of Education', in *Philosophy of Education: Major Themes in the Analytic Tradition*, Hirst and White (eds.) (Florence: Routledge, 1998) 107.

⁴⁶ Hummel, 'Aristotle', *Prospects: the quarterly review of comparative education*, 1993, vol.23, no.1/2, 2.

⁴⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on Virtue*, Ralph McInerny (trans.) (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 1999) 41–42.

the basic human goal of becoming truly human; that is – becoming a fully flourishing and good human being.

It is clear then that the primary meaning of education is inherently connected to, and identifiable with, what it is essentially to be a human. I have demonstrated this in three ways; first through the argument that education is inherent in the identity of being a human as rational; secondly, through the argument that education is necessary for achieving our humanity as thinking beings; and thirdly, through the argument that education is essential to the overarching purpose of being a human. All three arguments rest firmly on the unifying identity of being human as an act of thinking-acting-existence. In other words, all three arguments rest on the basic ontological principle that being is always the being of an entity.

5. The Formation of Identity as the Essence of Education

What remains in this section is to briefly unpack the implications of these arguments for how we consider what being educated and being an educator is all about. In the first instance, I will outline three positive implications for what we can say education necessarily and essentially involves. Following this, I will suggest that there are a number of implications here for what we can in an unqualified sense state that education is not, at least in any primary sense.

To say that education is grounded upon being human as an intrinsic and essential activity of our movement from potentiality to actuality allows us to determine, in the first instance, that a primary meaning of education is ‘the formation of identity’. Being a human is defined by our capacity to reason, and indeed, almost every activity humans engage in is grounded in the act of reasoning in the most general sense. It follows necessarily, then, that human identity will be intrinsically tied up with the formation of our potentiality for the activities of reasoning.

There are several ways in which education as the formation of reasoning functions as the formation of human identity. The first, and most obvious, is that learning how to reason enables in us a deeper and more complex sense of our own self-identity as a person who thinks. The more we learn about thinking the more aware we are of the complexities implicit in thinking, the relationship between thinking and our sense of ‘self’ or ‘personality’, and our awareness of our own unique character which becomes accessible through thinking about one’s-self. In other words, learning how to reason forms our human identity as an individual self-reflexive entity.

However, there are a number of less obvious but equally important senses of the formation of human identity in learning how to reason. For instance, in learning how to reason, we learn more about ‘what’

kind of entity we are. That is, learning how to reason teaches us more in depth what kind of entity humans are as thinking beings, and this forms the identity of our humanity, not simply as an individual entity, but moreover as a kind of entity of which there are many others with whom we share an identity.⁴⁸

In another way, the formation of reason also forms our identity insofar as it gives us access to ‘how’ we are as a thinking entity. Through reason, humans gain access to an awareness of the kind of activities and actualities that are possible for humans. Gloria Dall’Alba expresses this aspect of the formation of identity beautifully, stating: “through taking up some possibilities and not others, we contribute to forming our present and future. . . Not only do human beings have a range of possible ways to be, but also our being is an issue for us; it matters to us who we are and who we are becoming”.⁴⁹ In other words, learning to reason forms our identity as a being who has various potentialities for being, and thus, an entity for whom being is an issue.

Beyond this, the formation of reason also discloses to us the kinds of goals or activities that we care about and that are intrinsically valuable to us, qua being a human.⁵⁰ This is the basic realisation that sits at the heart of what is traditionally meant by liberal arts education; that is, those things that humans care freely about for our own sake and for the sake of our own identity.⁵¹ Additionally, learning how to reason in this sense constitutes our identity as free persons;⁵² that it is only through learning how to reason that we are able to freely choose.

Finally, learning how to reason also discloses in ourselves possibilities for the formation of self-identity in a practical sense, that is: thinking about the action\activities proper to being human, and therein, also learning to think about what constitutes being a good human (eudemonia). We find Aristotle discussing this in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he argues that the happy or good person is a virtuous or excellent person; but a person is only virtuous on the basis of education.⁵³ We find a similar argument in Aquinas, who argues that “the purpose of education is to promote good human

⁴⁸ Karol Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, Andrzej Potocki (trans.) (Dordrecht: D.Reidel Publishing, 1979) 7, 80, 267, 294–295.

⁴⁹ Gloria Dall’Alba, ‘Learning Professional Ways of Being’, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Vol. 41, No.1 2009, 36.

⁵⁰ Conyers, ‘Vocation and the Liberal Arts’, *Modern Age*, Spring, 123.

⁵¹ Conyers, ‘Vocation and the Liberal Arts’, 123.

⁵² John E. Jalbert, ‘Leisure and Liberal Education: a plea for uselessness’, *Philosophical Studies in Education*, 2009, vol.40, 227–8.

⁵³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1100^b9–10, 1103^a14–19. Hummel provides a clear and concise synopsis of Aristotle’s argument on the relation between virtue, education, and human identity.

lives by cultivating virtue”.⁵⁴ Therefore, learning to reason forms our identity insofar as it teaches us and enables in us the formation of identity as an entity with the potential to be an excellent or good human being.

6. Secondary, Derivative, and Accidental Senses of Education

Insofar as the argument that education is intrinsic to the identity of being human in our movement from potentiality to act or in our activities of becoming it is possible to clearly deconstruct certain views of education. As Aquinas noted in ‘On Being and Essence’, when we determine something to be essential to the being of something, we are then able to exclude all other features or characteristics from our determination of what is primary to being that kind of entity.⁵⁵ It follows, then, that insofar as education primarily signifies the formation of human identity through learning how to reason that all other characteristics can be then determined as either secondary and derivative or accidental. This allows the deconstruction of any definition or account of education that focuses on secondary or even accidental properties of the activity of being educated or educating.

The first thing we can say is that it is impossible to define education as the absorption or transmission of facts or data. This is the case inasmuch as the transmission of facts and data has nothing to do with what it is to become a fully flourishing human; is extraneous to the development of reason, and is extraneous to formation of our identity as human beings. As both Plato and Heidegger argue, the essence of education is not pouring into the mind knowledge as if the mind is an empty container waiting to be filled.⁵⁶

Additionally, it is possible to determine that the primary meaning of education is not vocational; although vocational education is important as a secondary meaning of education involving the development of specialised knowledge. There are frequent claims, in our contemporary world, that education when directed at theory rather than vocation is separate from the ‘real world’ of work, and further, that education should be changed to be more practical in preparing students for this ‘real world’.⁵⁷ Of course, these claims are deeply

⁵⁴ John Haldane, ‘Metaphysics in the Philosophy of Education’, 108.

⁵⁵ Aquinas, ‘On Being and Essence’, 34.

⁵⁶ Plato, Republic, 518b; see also: Martin Heidegger, ‘Plato’s Doctrine of Truth’, Thomas Sheehan (trans.), in *Pathmarks*, William McNeill (ed.) (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998) 167.

⁵⁷ John Haldane, ‘The context of education: monastery or marketplace?’, in Richard Pring (ed.), *Philosophy of Education: Aims, Common Sense and Research* (London: Continuum, 2005) 65.

problematic; first because the real world for humans is our activity of existing as a thinking entity, and further, because what is meant by the 'real world' is the activity of thinking that serves as the basic foundation for achieving those things we are inclined towards or believe are good.⁵⁸ If we have not first learnt how to think well, and who we are as entities who think, then we will without doubt find it harder to achieve what we desire or even work out what it is that is worth desiring.

Finally, it is possible to determine that scientific and technical forms of knowledge are not the primary meanings of education. This is not to say that science and technology are not important features of being educated, but rather, that they cannot be constituted as the primary sense of education. Being educated in the sciences or in technology involves quite distinct tasks that are born out of the human relation with other entities in the world. Science, I would suggest, begins with the desire for knowledge and is a kind of relation with entities in the world. This relation is one that is dependent, on the one hand, on other entities, and on the other, dependent upon our own kind of being, i.e., thinking. Likewise, technical knowledge (or technology) is born out of a desire, as Heidegger calls it, to make one's-self at home in the world.⁵⁹ Technology, as such, is again a relationship between the being of humans and other entities in the mode of production or use. In both instances, these kinds of relations are only possible insofar as we already have the activity of existing as a thinking entity and it is thus only in our identity as a thinking entity that we will find the primary sense of education.

It is important to note here that in the same way that facts and data, vocation, science and technology are not the primary meaning of what it is to be educated, so too it follows that we can't constitute these things as the primary meaning of what it is or how it is to be an educator. Pedagogy cannot be, as it were a technique or technology of production in any primary sense, for no technique or technology can produce a thinking-acting-living human being. Nor can any scientific production of knowledge inform us of what it is to be an educator insofar as it is the task of an educator to nurture the formation of the identity of individual thinking beings, rather than know the student as a static object from the outside. Science and the scientific method

⁵⁸ Anoop Gupta, 'Education: From telos to technique?', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, vol.40, no.2, 2008, 275.

⁵⁹ Martin Heidegger, 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking', David Farrell Krell (ed.) in *Basic Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993) 347–349; Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, William Lovitt (trans.) (New York: Harper & Row, 1977) 34.

cannot provide the understanding required for any real grasp of the meaning of education.⁶⁰

I have established, I hope, quite convincingly that the primary sense of education is the formation or activity of forming the capacity of humans to think well, and in thinking well, living well and forming one's own identity as an entity who exists through the activity of thinking. This primary sense of education is firmly grounded on the ontological principle that being is always the being of an entity; as a unified individual act of existence. I would now like to turn very briefly to the analogous meaning of education which hinges upon the ontological principle that being is always the being of an entity.

Conclusion

As Aristotle argued in the *Metaphysics*, being can be said in several senses, but all of these senses hinge on or refer back to one primary sense, or one entity. The method of unifying and integrating various senses of a concept under one primary meaning is later developed with greater complexity and rigour in Aquinas and became known as the analogy of being.⁶¹ This method of analogy, I think, is also appropriate in determining the unity of the various senses of education.

In this article, I have attempted in brief to outline the various meanings of education insofar as education is founded upon the ontological principle that being is always the being of an entity. In this, I argued that there are at least three senses of education; the formation of identity, the formation of our activities of existing in community, and the formation of our activities of being in relation to entities in the world. In accord with Aristotle and Aquinas, I would claim that there is only one primary sense of being educated and that is the formation of the identity of human individuals qua reasoning entities. It is only on this basis, and within this sense of the meaning of education, that we discover the unifying meaning of education upon which the secondary or derivative meanings are based.

That the primary meaning of education is the formation of our human identity allows us to determine what it is that we are attempting to achieve in educating and moreover, reminds us of what is essential to being an educator. To be an educator is to be concerned with the capacity all humans have to live an excellent and fully flourishing human life. However, unless we first learn about and come face to

⁶⁰ Karl Hostetler, '(Mis)Understanding Human Beings: Theory, Value, and Progress in Education Research', *Educational Studies*, 46, 2010, 401, 409–411, 413.

⁶¹ Ralph McInerney, *Aquinas and Analogy* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1998).

face with ourselves as entities who live on the basis of thinking we will find it very difficult to live well, or actualise the potentialities we have for existing.

It is also important to remind ourselves that the secondary or derivative meanings of education depend on the primary meaning for their cogency. Any argument that suggests that education can be merely vocational, scientific, or technical misses what it is fundamentally to be educated as a human being. This is why it is of the utmost importance to return to and re-read metaphysics. A re-reading of metaphysics reminds us not only of who we are and what potentiality we have for the activities of existing, but also reminds us of how and in what sense education is essential to being human.

Dr Angus Brook

*Lecturer in Philosophy and Associate
Dean of the School of Philosophy & Theology
University of Notre Dame Australia, Sydney
Telephone: 02 8204-4182
E-mail: angus.brook@nd.edu.au*