

## TO TEACH OR NOT TO TEACH?

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LEADING EDUCATORS have expressed the conviction that the most characteristic note of modern educational thought and practice is confusion and bewilderment. Disagreement among philosophers and educators concerning such basic notions as the ultimate reality, the validity of knowledge, and man's origin, nature, and final end is manifestly the fundamental cause of this confusion.<sup>1</sup> Since there are conflicting views concerning the validity of the nature and sources of true and certain knowledge, quite naturally there is a diversity of opinion regarding the theory of teacher and student activity in education.

The theory of the Moderns obviously is in opposition to the traditional theory of education. Traditional education has become outmoded and judged basically unsound. "Under it, the student was passive, when he ought to have been active. The teacher reigned through a tyranny of words. In the new era, then, action must replace words; student activity must replace teacher activity. In a word, the student must increase, the teacher decrease, until finally, as John Dewey conceived it, the teacher is a learner, and the learner, without his knowing it, is a teacher."<sup>2</sup> No longer a mere concept, this new idea of teacher and student activity has become the norm of our "progressive" school system. We are reduced to the point where we may ask in all seriousness: CAN ONE MAN TEACH ANOTHER?

About the year 1256, St. Thomas Aquinas proposed this very question to the students attending his lectures at the University of Paris.<sup>3</sup> In the course of the disputation which followed the Angelic Doctor refuted the errors doing the most harm to the cause of truth. At that time, it was the Avicennic opinion of William of Auvergne which occupied his attention in the tract *De Magistro*.<sup>4</sup> Ten years later,

<sup>1</sup> Redden and Ryan, *A Catholic Philosophy of Education*, Bruce, Milwaukee, 1942, pp. 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> Hart, J. L., O.P., *Teacher Activity in the De Magistro of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Dissertation, Dominican House of Studies, Washington, D. C., 1944, p. 1. This dissertation has served as the primary source for the material of this article.

<sup>3</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 117, a. 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Q. D. De Verit.*, q. 11.

in the composition of the first part of the *Summa Theologiae*, the Averrhoistic movement of Siger of Brabant would stand out as the major opponent to truth.<sup>5</sup> In the confutation of these errors St. Thomas has given us a rather clear outline of the true traditional theory of teacher and student activity in education.

With the modern revolution against the whole spiritual order of things, the problem of the nature of man is approached by way of the senses and experimentation. The realm of the supernatural, authority, and tradition have had to give way to the new order of the natural and the free. Man has been liberated! He is now self-sufficient—freed from the tyranny of authority of the teacher! Out of this revolution has arisen the Activity School diametrically opposed to traditional methods and spiritual values. "*The past with its insistence on authority was not concerned with thinking but was an instrument to prevent thinking.*"<sup>6</sup> The activity of the teacher in the new school is "to provide the setting, or, at best, a directive environment where the free creative spirit of children would operate."<sup>7</sup> The proponents of the new system argue that the times have changed and that the student has come into the limelight. "As teacher we must try to make ourselves progressively unnecessary. The present must honestly try to yield sovereignty of control to the rising generation."<sup>8</sup> Thus the teaching profession has been dealt a mortal blow.

The greatest advocate of modern methods in the educational field has been John Dewey. For Dewey the traditional theory of teacher activity was objectionable because "*no thought, no idea, can possibly be conveyed as an idea from one person to another.*" When it is told, it is, to the one to whom it is told, another given fact, not an idea. The communication may stimulate the other person to realize the question for himself and to think out a like idea, or it may smother his intellectual interest and suppress his dawning effort at thought. But what he directly gets cannot be an idea."<sup>9</sup>

Dewey's whole argumentation minimizes the importance of the teacher, and goes so far as to reduce the status of the teacher to that of a learner. ". . . The alternative to furnishing ready-made subject matter and listening to the accuracy with which it is reproduced is not quiescence, but participation, sharing, in an activity. In such shared

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<sup>5</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, p. 117, a. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Hart, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> Demiaskevich, M. J., *The Activity School*, New York, 1926, p. 84.

<sup>8</sup> Kilpatrick, W. H., *Education for a Changing Civilization*, New York, 1928, p. 123.

<sup>9</sup> Dewey, J., *Democracy and Education*, New York, 1936, p. 188.

activity, *the teacher is a learner*, and the learner is, without knowing it, a teacher."<sup>10</sup> Briefly, the position of the Activity School may be summed up in the following remark: "All educational reformers, as we have had occasion to remark, are given to attacking the *passivity of traditional education*."<sup>11</sup>

It is evident that modern educators take a vigorous stand against the "authoritarianism" of the Traditional School. For unless the student grasp the truth through experimentation and thought, he cannot be said to possess the truth. Thus is raised the problem of the nature and definition of knowledge. Obviously, the solution to this problem is fundamental to a right estimation of the role of the teacher, whose profession it is to impart the knowledge of the truth. What then is knowledge?

Since it is impossible to reach complete agreement on the definition of such a basic term, and since it is our intention here to re-examine the teaching of the Traditional School, we shall follow one of the greatest traditional educators, St. Thomas Aquinas, and distinguish knowledge from *opinion* and *belief*.

Belief in the strict sense is always synonymous with knowledge, that is, a union of the intellect and its object. This term is also used to mean faith in the divinely revealed truths of God; it is then defined as an assent of the intellect with absolute certainty, in which the reason for the assent is the authority of God revealing the truth. The assent given to human testimony is also called belief. And finally, belief is used to describe theories or viewpoints.

There are different states of mind toward the objects of knowledge. A man's mental attitude may be one of doubt, in which the mind cannot determine the truth or falsity of a judgment made concerning an object. Or it may be one of opinion—a decision is reached that the judgment is true but there lingers a fear that it might be false. Certitude is had when the mind ascertains without fear of error that the judgment is true. Knowledge, therefore, is the firm adherence of the intellect to the truth on evidence presented to it.<sup>12</sup>

The question now arises concerning the source of the intellect's power in judging the truth and acquiring knowledge. How can the intellect stand free of all authority and obtain the truth without fear of error? An understanding of the answer to these questions requires first a consideration of the Thomistic doctrine on the nature of the intellect.

<sup>10</sup> Dewey, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>12</sup> Hart, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21; Redden and Ryan, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

The intellect is a spiritual faculty of the soul which, through the apprehension of the essences of material things and the formulation of universal concepts, acquires knowledge. That part of the intellect which abstracts the intelligible from the phantasms in the imagination is called the active intellect. The potency of the intellect which receives the abstracted similitudes from the active intellect is known as the passive or possible intellect.<sup>13</sup> We did not enter this world with intellects filled with all knowledge as the Platonists held. Rather "as matter considered according to its essence has no form, so the human intellect in its beginning is as a tablet upon which nothing has been written, but afterwards knowledge is acquired in it through the senses by virtue of the active intellect."<sup>14</sup>

The active intellect is not the object of knowledge; it is that whereby the objects are made knowable. These objects come in contact with some external sense, for example the eyes, which pass on the information to the common sense, one of man's internal senses, whose proper function is to perceive the activity of the various external senses and to compare and distinguish their data. The imagination then comes into play as the conservative faculty, reproductive of the images received from the external senses. At this stage of the process of knowledge there is a big gap between the material image or phantasm of the imagination and the intelligible species which the intellect makes its own in the acquisition of knowledge. This gap is bridged by the active intellect which performs the mystery of abstraction and activates the passive intellect thus producing knowledge.

Though the human intellect starts life as a blank sheet, it comes armed with certain first concepts which the light of the active intellect immediately recognizes through the species abstracted from the data presented to the mind by the senses. From these first universal concepts all other knowledge springs as "from germinal capacities."<sup>15</sup> St. Thomas cannot be accused of holding for the theory of innate ideas or habits. The seeds of knowledge are not in the state of actuality from the beginning, but they are in potency to know as soon as the senses present the material upon which the active intellect may act to produce knowledge in the passive intellect. What are these beginnings of knowledge, these seeds of knowledge?

These seeds of knowledge are universal ideas and principles, and may be "complex as axioms or simple as an idea of being, unity or

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<sup>13</sup> Gardeil, H. D., *Initiation à la philosophie de S. Thomas d'Aquin—Métaphysique*, Editions du Cerf, Paris, 1952, p. 223.

<sup>14</sup> *Q. D. De Verit.*, q. 18, a. 7.

<sup>15</sup> *Q. D. De Verit.*, q. 11, a. 1.

something of this nature which the intellect grasps immediately."<sup>16</sup> The Angelic Doctor says: "That which before all else falls under apprehension is being, the notion of which is included in all things whatsoever a man apprehends. Wherefore the first indemonstrable principle is that the same thing cannot be affirmed and denied at the same time, which is based on the notion of being and not-being, and on this principle all others are based."<sup>17</sup> Once the human intellect grasps what a whole is and what a part is, it should immediately perceive that "every whole is greater than its parts"; in like manner "things equal to one and the same thing are equal to one another" is a self-evident proposition which is beyond proof.<sup>18</sup>

These universal principles, though dependent upon the senses for the matter upon which to work, are nevertheless given to us by God alone. Without the light of reason, the efforts of the human teacher are vain. "God is the cause of man's knowledge in the most excellent way possible, because He endows the mind itself with the intellectual light and impresses on it the knowledge of first principles which are certain germs of knowledge; just as He impresses on other natural things the germinal capacities of all the effects to be produced."<sup>19</sup> About this fact there can be no doubts. But how can man grow in knowledge, and how can a human teacher fulfill such an important part in the intellectual growth of the student?

From what has been said it is clear that from the universal principles of knowledge all other knowledge follows. And experience shows it to be a fact that men discover things, and can acquire knowledge without the help of a human teacher. But in acquiring knowledge, man proceeds from the general to the particular, from the more common to the less common, from the implicit to the explicit. The help of a teacher for the acquisition of such knowledge is indispensable at times. In the case of discovery, knowledge is said to pre-exist in the knower in active potentiality and not in purely passive potentiality, as is the case when the learner is not able on his own to draw out the potential knowledge.<sup>20</sup> The fact that knowledge exists in active potentiality is of special significance in speaking of teacher activity. For it means that teaching is not simply a matter of pouring in knowledge from without, which might be the case if knowledge were in passive potentiality only. It also indicates that the learner must do the principal work in the process of being taught, for the work of the teacher

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, q. 11, a. 1.

<sup>17</sup> *S. T. I-II*, q. 94, a. 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 51, a. 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Q. D. De Verit.*, q. 11, a. 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, q. 11, a. 1.



is that of an extrinsic agent only, as the doctor in healing is a minister to nature.<sup>21</sup> And just as the physician does not ignore nature in treating a patient, but tries as skillfully as possible to assist it with its special needs, so the teacher must not ignore the nature of the student.

There are, therefore, two ways of acquiring knowledge. The process of discovery whereby we seek and find the truth by ourselves is the most eminent. In this process, by means of the knowledge of general, self-evident principles, which pre-exist in us in active potentiality, we are able to apply these principles to definite matters and proceed from them to particular conclusions, and from these to others.<sup>22</sup> The supreme importance of the teacher's work, however, is readily appreciated in the second and more common way of acquiring knowledge. Here, the student seeks the truth at the feet of a teacher. History proves that the individual man, without an instructor, discovers the truth far too slowly to meet the needs and situations of a short life. Despite his genius, this heart-breaking labor is often discouraging because of the uncovering of tragic error along with a smattering of truth. By far, the great majority of mankind must rely upon the wisdom of other men passed on to them by teachers.<sup>23</sup>

Now the application of universal principles to particular things is recorded in the memory. By research, advancing from the known to the unknown, we obtain new knowledge.<sup>24</sup> The teacher must base his procedure upon this natural function of the human intellect. Hence "the teacher proposes to another by means of symbols the discursive process which he himself goes through by natural reason, and thus the natural reason of the pupil comes to a cognition of the unknown through the aid of what is proposed to him as with the aid of instruments."<sup>25</sup> In this wise, the teacher conveys his knowledge to his disciples who previously were unaware of this new knowledge.

The activity of the teacher falls upon one of two things: the intellect itself or the object of the intellect. Since the intellect is a spiritual faculty it is touched only indirectly by indicating the procedure from principles to conclusions in the event that the student is not able to do this for himself.<sup>26</sup> The very power of the intellect is to know things discursively by reducing them to first principles. The drawback

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> cf. St. Thomas, *Summa contra gentiles*, I, ch. IV.; also Farrell, W., O.P. and Healy, M., *My Way of Life*, Confraternity of the Precious Blood, Brooklyn, N. Y., 1952, p. 147.

<sup>24</sup> *S. T.*, I, q. 117, a. 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Q. D. De Verit.*, q. 11, a. 1.

<sup>26</sup> *S. T.*, I, q. 117, a. 1.

of this spiritual faculty is that it must proceed gradually, step by step. For some, this slow process of discourse is too difficult a task to be undertaken alone; others may advance with relative ease. The teacher is nevertheless useful to all because of his knowledge and proficiency in his art.

With regard to the object upon which the intellect acts, it is the business of the teacher to propose the instruments the student must use. For instance, the teacher may propose less universal propositions which the student may be able to judge from previous experience; or he may present some sensible examples for the student's consideration. Either way the teacher leads the student to the knowledge of previously unknown truths.<sup>27</sup> The art of examples is the imitation of nature. For "anyone can experience this for himself, that when he tries to understand something, he forms certain phantasms to serve him by way of examples, in which as it were he examines what he is desirous of knowing. For this reason it is that when we wish to help someone to understand something, we lay examples before him, from which he forms phantasms for the purpose of understanding."<sup>28</sup>

The student, then, is the central figure around which the whole activity of the teacher must be focused. To cause knowledge in another is the very *raison d'être* of a teacher. The interest of the student will move the teacher to take the necessary pains to distinguish and multiply examples to insure that the student grasps the subject matter after the manner in which the teacher knows it.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, the master does not plunge the disciple into the depths of the art or science, but rather, he leads him to the gentle spring waters which flow gradually, yet inevitably, into the sea of knowledge. His classroom preparation may, indeed, consist in the contemplation of the truth, yet it is aimed at the student for whom the work is accomplished. The teacher's activity, therefore, pertains to the active and not the contemplative life.<sup>30</sup>

As has been seen above, some have denied that the activity of the teacher truly causes knowledge. St. Thomas has defended his position by drawing an analogy between the activity of the teacher and that of the physician. Just as the physician who assists the activity of nature is said to cause health in a sick person, so the teacher is said to cause knowledge in another through the operation of the learner's intellect. This is called teaching.<sup>31</sup> But we know now, that this activity of en-

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, I, q. 84, a. 7.

<sup>29</sup> *Q. D. De Verit.*, q. 9, a. 5.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, q. 11, a. 4.—*S. T.*, II-II, q. 181, a. 3.

<sup>31</sup> *Q. D. De Verit.*, q. 11, a. 1.

gendering knowledge in the soul of the learner is an instrumental causality and not an efficient causality.<sup>32</sup> It is precisely for this reason that the student must do the principal work, if his mind is to grow. This is not to imply, however, that the principal agent in the process of learning acts upon the instrumental agent as the Moderns have gone so far as to maintain. Instrumental power, it is true, is derived by the instrument from the principal agent, who is the efficient cause of the instrument's activity. The instrumental activity of the teacher, however, is so called because of the ministerial capacity of the office, which consists in presenting the instruments to be used by the active intellect of the learner in the acquisition of knowledge.

Teaching is a co-operative art in the exercise of which the teacher is only an extrinsic agent, who, nevertheless, is truly the cause of knowledge "just as a physician, although he works exteriorly while nature alone works interiorly, is said to cause healing."<sup>33</sup> It cannot be stressed too much, on the other hand, that the student is the principal cause of the resulting knowledge. There would be no knowledge without self-activity. Teaching does not consist in the knowledge possessed by the teacher; it is not the communication of that knowledge by means of words; nor is it the repetition by rote of this knowledge as expressed by the teacher, for words and knowledge are but the means to the end of teaching. Rather, teaching consists in the natural function of the student's intellect upon the knowledge communicated to him by the teacher.

The teacher attains his purpose by using what the student already knows as the firm foundation upon which to erect the superstructure of knowledge. If the teacher neglects to do this, by failing to resolve the things known into their principles, then the student does not have certain and true knowledge but only some measure of probability.<sup>34</sup> For this reason, it does not suffice that the teacher, worthy of the name, merely produce an objectively conclusive argument. As a skilled artist he places the subject matter of his art before the student according to the latter's capacity, thus instructing him little by little.<sup>35</sup>

From this brief exposition of the doctrine of the Traditional School as exemplified in the writings of St. Thomas, we should now be able to evaluate the opinions of the Moderns concerning the activity of teaching. It should be apparent that it is one of the cornerstones of

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<sup>32</sup> Maritain, J., in Preface to F. de Hovre, *Philosophy and Education*, N. Y., 1931, p. x.

<sup>33</sup> *Q. D. De Verit.*, q. 11, a. 1, ad 7um.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, q. 12, a. 1.

<sup>35</sup> *S. T.*, II-II, q. 1, a. 7, ad 2um.



Thomistic teaching in this matter that every child born into this world is a self-activist. But it is false to conclude from this that the teacher's activity consists merely in providing "the setting, or, at best, a directive environment where the free creative spirit of children would operate."<sup>36</sup> The teacher's service is far greater than this. For he takes the child by the hand and leads him intellectually to attain that perfection of knowledge which his young mind possesses only in potentiality. And this the teacher does more quickly and easily than the child could do by himself.<sup>37</sup>

The modern world has made many marvelous advances which can and should be used as mediums of teaching. Yet, it hardly follows that, because the times have changed, the teacher has become, and should become progressively unnecessary. The means of communicating knowledge have indeed become more readily available, as for instance books, but it must be remembered that a book is a teacher's doctrine in print. The teacher as teacher only becomes unnecessary when he has communicated his knowledge to the students. The times will continue to change, but the nature of man remains the same. He will always be born in potentiality to knowledge, and the services of the teacher will always be necessary to help him acquire the knowledge which the teacher possesses in act.

Dewey's objection against teacher activity on the grounds that "no thought, no idea, can possibly be conveyed as an idea from one person to another" is not valid. For words are the means of communicating knowledge. "From sensible symbols, which are received into the sense faculty, the intellect takes the essence which it uses in producing knowledge in itself."<sup>38</sup> The learner never recognizes knowledge immediately from the intelligible species of the teacher's mind, but only through the spoken or written word, the expressed signs of the intellectual concept.<sup>39</sup>

The implication of Dewey's alternative to the "passive" method of the Traditionalists seems to be that the student must discover everything for himself. The teacher may only help by entering into the common experience of learning with the student. If this alternative implies that actual experience of everything is the only medium of acquiring knowledge, then we may dismiss the implication as being obviously untenable. If by this shared activity, however, is meant a common or conjoint intellectual experience, there is an element of

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<sup>36</sup> Demiaskevich, *loc. cit.*

<sup>37</sup> *Q. D. De Verit.*, q. 11, a. 2, ad 4um.

<sup>38</sup> *Q. D. De Verit.*, q. 11, a. 1, ad 4um.

<sup>39</sup> *S. T.*, III, q. 12, a. 3, ad 2um.

truth in Dewey's statement. In the logical exposition of some branch of learning, according to the intellectual capacity of the student, there is undoubtedly a common intellectual experience.

In this shared activity, according to Dewey, "the teacher is a learner, and the learner is, without knowing it, a teacher."<sup>40</sup> The contradiction in this statement should be apparent to the reader now. We know that a man through the use of his own reason and without the help of a teacher can attain to the knowledge of many unknown things by way of discovery. Because he thus is the cause of his own knowledge, we speak of such a man as being self-taught, but this is an improper use of the word.<sup>41</sup> We have already seen that to be a teacher implies a perfect knowledge of the subject being taught, whereas to be a learner implies not actually possessing the knowledge of what is being taught. Therefore, to be a teacher and a learner of the same subject at one and the same time, and under the same aspect, involves a patent contradiction.

In speaking of the passivity of traditional education we must distinguish between the theory and the practice. In theory, the student cannot be passive if he is to learn. He must grapple with the truth himself in order to make it completely his own. Everything he is offered by the teacher must be weighed and evaluated in accordance with the first principles of reason and what he already knows. On this basis only, should he accept or reject whatever is proposed to him. In practice, however, it can happen that the student is completely passive. This situation is not the fault of the method, but the result of improper application of the principles regulating the activity of the teacher. Such a condition is apparent when a teacher uses the privilege of his position as an opportunity of manifesting his learning. The student is left to grope for himself. He must become a discoverer in the classroom. And since the burden of such an effort is often too much for the ordinary student, the truth is accepted on the authority of the teacher, or it produces complete indifference in his mind. Dewey's objection then is not against the theory of the traditional method but against the faulty application of it, in practice, by teachers. The teacher must make the practice conform to the theory.

The teacher is just another man with the same kind of intellect as his students. His business is to present the material for knowing in a clear and logical manner. After he has removed the impediments to knowledge from the intellectual vision of his students, he can only

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<sup>40</sup> Dewey, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

<sup>41</sup> *Q. D. De Verit.*, q. 11, a. 2.

wait and hope that the tree of knowledge will blossom and bear an abundant fruit.

Teaching is indeed a noble profession. The greatest teacher of all time, the Incarnate Word of God, spent most of His short public life teaching in an extraordinary way the truths men so urgently need to attain the goal of their life, eternal happiness. And this is man's privilege, that he share in the eternal utterance of the Truth, helping in some measure to enlighten the minds of men. Of such great consequence is the Truth for men, that The Teacher, Jesus, could say of Himself: "For this was I born, and for this came I into the world; that I should give testimony to the truth."<sup>42</sup> Without the truth, we perish. Great is the need for teachers!<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> John, 18, 37.

<sup>43</sup> Farrell, *op. cit.*, p. 149.