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The Prospect of an Ideal Liberal Arts College Curriculum : Reconstructing the Dewey-Hutchins Debate

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. . . when [John Andrew] Rice began speaking publicly about what he viewed as administrative hypocrisy at the college [Rollins College] (noting, for example, that 30 percent faculty pay cuts occurred while large new building were being constructed), Rollins president Hamilton Holt called for his resignation. When it was not forthcoming, Holt terminated his appointment in the spring of 1933.

—K. C. Reynolds (1995:10)

What you do with what you know is the important thing. To know is not enough.

—J. A. Rice (1937:595)

As a college instructor, a former student at Oxford University and a fellow admirer of John Dewey's educational ideas, it is perhaps unsurprising that I would be attracted to the biography of John Andrew Rice, the founder of Black Mountain College. Indeed, similar to Rice's experience with Rollins College, I had my own troubles with a college administration unconcerned with student-centered learning and, in my case, the ethical obligation of confidentiality that faculty have to their students. In his autobiography, Rice (1942:307) wryly observes, "to be known as a 'trouble-maker' in the academic world is certain death." After being terminated as a temporary lecturer at a small college in western Colorado, I nearly decided to quit my life-long goal of becoming an educator. After an extended period of soul-searching, my faith in the enterprise of higher education was eventually restored.[\[i\]](#)

Part of Rice's legacy, besides being a founder of Black Mountain College, I believe, is his vision of what a small liberal arts college curriculum should be. This vision helps shed light on some possible avenues by which to answer the following important questions: What implications do John Dewey's progressive educational ideas have for experimenting with curricular design at small colleges? Does the college teacher's struggle for improvement or growth depend on her

having a belief that there is an ideal liberal arts college curriculum? Probably the best known of such ready-made curricula is the Great Books Program, which employs a list of classic primary-source texts as the entry point into highly engaged dialogue, scholarship and learning guided by a teacher or tutor. In order to answer these questions, the paper turns to the historical debate between John Dewey and Robert Maynard Hutchins over the relative merits of progressive educational ideals and the Great Books approach. Most who have commented on this debate emphasize the differences between Dewey and Hutchins' views.^[ii] While Dewey emphasized learning through practical problem solving, in a dynamic mix of subject matter and method, Hutchins stressed exposure to and discussion of at least one-hundred primary texts in the Western canon, from Plato and Aristotle to Emerson and J.S. Mill. Hutchins resisted what he saw as the progressive educator's push to transform the proper end of educating the whole person into training her for a particular vocation. In response, Dewey criticized Hutchins' insistence that there existed a "hierarchy of truths" and that higher learning should remain aloof to the concerns of everyday life. Few commentators, however, mention the significant areas of agreement between the pedagogical approaches of Dewey and Hutchins, as well as other Great Books scholars. Since Rice praised the ideas of at least one Great Books proponent (Stringfellow Barr of St. John's College), a more positive reconstruction of the Dewey-Hutchins exchange helps us to see how Dewey's ideas informed Rice's vision for the experimental college at Black Mountain—or so I argue.^[iii]

The paper is organized as follows. The first section presents the features of Dewey's philosophy *as* education. In the second, I outline the key elements of Rice's vision of a small liberal arts curriculum, a vision that guides educational practice at Black Mountain College. What these two sections make clear is that Rice's vision was undeniably influenced by John Dewey's educational philosophy. Then, the third section provides a detailed account and reconstruction of Dewey's debate with Hutchins. In the conclusion, I attempt to identify some vital lessons that might be gleaned from the debate's reconstruction, as well as their relation to Rice's vision for the method and content—or the 'how' and 'what'—of curricular design at a small liberal arts college.

According to Jim Garrison (1998), Dewey understood philosophy *as* education, rather than philosophy as a matter *of* education. The relevant difference is that in the case of the latter (or philosophy *of* education), philosophical concepts frame an analysis of pedagogy, as philosophers already analyze other areas of study (e.g., science, math, language, sex and love), whereas in the former (philosophy *as* education), education pervades or constitutes all philosophical inquiries, for philosophy broadly-construed is, in Dewey's words, "the general theory of education" (MW 7:303, cited in Garrison 1998:63).^[iv] Garrison's cogent account of Dewey's educational philosophy involves five key elements: (i) habit, (ii) environment, (iii) growth, (iv) communication and (v) democracy—each of which I will now briefly describe.

Dewey's philosophy *as* education involves "a process of forming fundamental dispositions" so that they "take effect in conduct" (MW 9:338, cited by Garrison 1998:63). These dispositions are beliefs and, more generally, habits that together form a person's character. Dewey defines a habit as "a way or manner of action, not a particular act or deed" (LW 12:21). In other words, a habit is a mode of conduct, not the conduct itself. According to Garrison (1998:64), "[p]hilosophy as education involves the critical acquisition of habits of conduct, controlled by

the ideal values that nurture human growth.” Values direct choice and action when existing habits prove unhelpful or obstructive to good conduct. Indeed, both values and habits can be evaluated naturalistically, instrumentally or conventionally.^[v] Yet, the ultimate test of a habit’s value is whether it directs inquiry in fruitful ways—ways that fund experience with meaning, render new connections, create helpful tools for future inquiries and develop the inquirer’s native abilities.^[vi] Not surprisingly, the test of a habit’s value is identical to the test for the value of education. Dewey writes: “What he [the student] has learned in the way of knowledge and skill [or habit] in one situation becomes an instrument of understanding and dealing effectively with the situations which follow” (LW 13:25-6). So, learning occurs through the accretion of intelligent habits that reflexively guide human action and inquiry, and thereby enrich experience.

For Dewey, the notion of interaction tells us that living organisms, whether sea anemones or human learners, are intimately connected with their environments. According to Tom Burke (1994:23), the “basic picture, generally speaking, is that of a given organism/environment system performing a wide range of operations as a normal matter of course—scanning, probing, ingesting, discharging, adapting to, approaching, avoiding, or otherwise moving about and altering things in routine ways, in order to maintain itself.” Whether within simple biological systems or complex social ones, environmental disruptions stimulate efforts by organisms to restore equilibrium, to adapt their (functionally-defined) internal and external environments (in a process biologists call ‘homeostasis’) and to subsequently develop in viable and meaningful ways. With respect to education, creating an environment that is conducive to learning is incumbent upon the educator. Indeed, Garrison (1998:69) draws attention to Dewey’s statement that “[w]e [as educators] design environments” (MW 9:23). So, mastery of the subject matter taught is not a sufficient condition for being an effective educator. Rather, good pedagogy integrates the subject-matter and innovative teaching methods within a learning environment that both appeals to and disciplines students’ natural impulses. For example, inquiry-based educational methods leverage the teacher’s ability to design projects that pique the students’ natural curiosity. These same projects should also channel students’ native energies by focusing attention on mastering techniques of inquiry and securing reliable outcomes.

For Dewey, education is a growth catalyst. According to Garrison (1998:70), “[t]he aim of education [for Dewey] is growth.” But what exactly does Dewey mean by growth? First, let’s examine what Dewey says, and then an interpretation by a recent commentator. Dewey writes:

Since life means growth, a living creature lives as truly and positively at one stage as at another, with the same intrinsic fullness and the same absolute claims. Hence education means the enterprise of supplying the conditions which ensure growth, or adequacy of life, irrespective of age (MW 9:56).

Educative growth occurs when a learner develops her potentialities under propitious circumstances, that is, in circumstances typically supplied by a thoughtful educator. In his recent book, *Inquiry and Education*, James Scott Johnston (2006:106-7) proposes that the term ‘growth’ means three possible things for Dewey. First, it is a biological or “organismic” capacity that humans as well as other organisms have for developing and adapting to their environs. Second, growth indicates the emerging evaluative or “judgmental” skills that humans display in solving problems. Third, it is “experiential” in the sense that humans can learn from experiences and

change their behaviors accordingly, thereby cultivating intelligent habits. Obviously, these three senses of growth are not mutually exclusive, but overlap to a considerable extent, especially when humans grow through learning. Therefore, the learning that takes place both in school and the greater society is a *sine qua non* for realizing Johnston's three dimensions of growth: biological, judgmental and experiential.

A properly designed educational environment also permits learners to become more effective and sympathetic communicators. Communication plays a crucial role in inquiry or problem-solving, as does language, the quintessential means or, in Dewey's words, the "tool of tools" (LW 1:134). Etymologically, to communicate is to make common (LW 10:248-9). Logic is the term of choice for Dewey in describing the pattern of inquiry common to scientific and ordinary discourse. Indeed, logic for Dewey signifies the "need for the development of a general theory of language in which form and matter are not separated" (LW 12:4). Form is nothing less than the techniques of inquiry and analysis; whereas matter is the subject-matter or content for inquiry and analysis. Through language use, form and matter, as well as techniques and subject-matter, can be viewed as reciprocally (or transactionally) related aspects of the same process: the process of meaningful communication. By converting objects in everyday experience into "things with a meaning," communication "whether it be public discourse or that preliminary discourse termed thinking" reconstructs conventional terms into precise instruments for resolving common problems (LW 1:132). In Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems*, democratic methods encompass communication and collaborative inquiry undertaken by citizens against a rich background of supportive institutions (LW 2:332).

Rather than recommend specific institutional forms, or "political democracy," Dewey deployed a set of leading principles (or postulations) that together are termed the "social idea" of democracy (LW 2:325). As postulations, they are intended to direct subsequent investigations; however, taken alone, they have no direct correspondence with any particular set of institutions. So, Dewey's democratic idea orients the democratic reformer towards a lofty, if somewhat vague, goal: namely, the "creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute" (LW 14:230). With respect to democratic education, Dewey was more concrete, envisioning an ideal school with four rooms, each on the corner of a central museum/library and each devoted to an individual area of study (e.g., physical/chemical science, biology, music and art) (MW 1:50). Four recitation rooms sit half in the four rooms and half in the central museum/library, "where the children bring the experiences, the problems, the questions, the particular facts which they have found, and discuss them so that new light may be thrown upon them, particularly new light from the experience of others, the accumulated wisdom of the world—symbolized in the library" (MW 1:51). Dewey's school design is based on the hypothesis that if we create democratic spaces for the purpose of pooling our ideas and sharing our experiences, then we can effectively increase opportunities for discussion and learning. Black Mountain College became one of these democratic-educational spaces. So, it is to Rice's educational philosophy and particularly his vision of a small liberal arts college curriculum that our inquiry now turns.

At the beginning of Rice biographer Katherine Reynold's (1995:4) paper "The Influence of John Dewey on Experimental Colleges," she describes how Dewey, during an initial speech as chair of the 1931 "Conference on Curriculum for the College of Liberal Arts" at Rollins College,

admitted his lack of expertise in the area of undergraduate education: “Dewey’s professed limitations concerning his understanding of undergraduate education may have provoked more than a few smiles among the impressive group of educators invited to Winter Park, Florida, to debate the ideal liberal arts college curriculum.” While she comments on how the many pedagogical innovators in the audience—presidents and founders of small liberal arts colleges such as Constance Warren of Sarah Lawrence and Arthur Morgan of Antioch—might have reacted, one is left to wonder how the budding visionary and soon-to-be founder of Black Mountain College (who was, by the way, not an invited guest) had felt about Dewey’s modest demurrer. Perhaps he saw it as a challenge to wed his own pedagogical vision to Dewey’s experimental, student-centered and democratic approach, to bring them together in a new and dissident institution. However, it was the unorthodox design of Rice’s own curriculum—his bristly way of employing the Socratic technique coupled with a relaxed interpretation of the Classics subject matter—which raised the ire of Hamilton Holt, Rollins College’s President, leading to what Martin Duberman (1973:6) calls the “Rollins Fracas” and eventually the founding of Black Mountain College.[\[vii\]](#)

So, what was Rice’s vision for a small liberal arts college curriculum? Given Rice’s admiration for Dewey’s educational philosophy, it is perhaps unsurprising that their visions coincided. Asking Dewey’s advice about what Black Mountain College’s mission would be, Dewey responded that he ought to “keep . . . [his] eye on the individual” (Rice 1942:324-325). Rice took Dewey’s advice to heart and imagined the college as a tool, “a means; the end [of which] was the individual.” Even more noteworthy than the Rice-Dewey comparison, though, are the commonalities between Rice’s vision of a small liberal arts college curriculum and the Great Books approach. According to Rice (1942:322),

Teaching is a secondary art. A man is a good teacher if he is a better something else; for teaching is communication, and his better something else is the storehouse of the things he will communicate. I have never known a master in any field who was not also a master teacher; but to be a master teacher in Black Mountain one had to be a master man [. . . A] man taught by the way he walked, by the sound of his voice, by every movement. That was what it was intended to be, the fulfillment of an old idea, the education of the whole man: by the whole man.

Even though Rice (1942:325) would only confess to sharing Hutchins’ insight “that colleges should be in tents” (what he called “our only point of agreement”), they did agree—and most Great Books advocates would also affirm—that the objective of education should be to educate the entire person. Both also assented to the proposition that the proper end of education is democratic. In Rice’s (1942:327) words, “Black Mountain was to be education for democracy. [. . .] [I]ts end, its job, was to send people out into a wide democracy.” And the curriculum, especially the art curriculum, at Black Mountain reflected this overwhelming faith in democracy: “The democratic man, we said [Rice, referring to the faculty at Black Mountain], must be an artist. The integrity, we said, of the democratic man was the integrity of the artist, an integrity of relationship” (328).

To appreciate Rice’s vision, it is also instructive to flesh out the source of his disagreement with Hutchins. Although his critical response to Hutchins was not as extensive as Dewey’s—he only wrote one essay, which appeared in *Harper’s Monthly*, as compared to Dewey’s three in the

Social Frontier—Rice’s argument was equally persuasive, and indeed resembled Dewey’s in some respects. To the college professor and anyone else who shares Rice’s vision, Hutchins’ (1936:2) characterization of the liberal arts college curriculum is offensive, to say the least. He writes:

The college of liberal arts is partly high school, partly university, partly general, partly special. Frequently it looks like a teacher-training institution. Frequently it looks like nothing at all. The degree it offers seems to certify that the student has passed an uneventful period without violating any local, state, or federal law, and that he has a fair, if temporary, recollection of what his teachers have said to him. [. . .] [L]ittle pretense is made that many of the things said to him are of much importance.

Hutchins’ solution is to return the general education curriculum to its roots in antiquity and the Middle Ages, stressing the value of the trivium (grammar, rhetoric and logic), classic texts and their “common stock of ideas.” Rice queries Hutchins: “Why then exclude from a general education all but one means of getting experience? [. . .] To some, Aeschylus and the sculpture of Chichen-Itza are in quality very near together. But we are to exclude one because it cannot be got from a book.” Rice’s response to Hutchins might seem entirely out of character for a classics professor. What must be kept in mind, though, is that he viewed the curriculum in more expansive and organic terms than Hutchins—that is, not limited to classic texts, but reaching beyond them to the visual and performing arts. Though Dewey’s critique of Hutchins’ position was not identical to Rice’s, it did share the assumption that curricular design requires a certain degree of tolerant pluralism. The choice of subject matter should not exalt some set of “truths” or aspects of experience to the exclusion of all others, in the way Hutchins sanctifies a selection of great books as the true edifice of an ideal liberal arts curriculum. In Rice’s (1937:595) words, “[e]ducation, instead of being the acquisition of a common stock of fundamental ideas, may well be a learning of a common way of doing things, a way of approach, a way of dealing with ideas or anything else.” So, to answer the initial question, Rice’s vision of a liberal arts college curriculum was not *curricular* in the ordinary sense of offering specific subject matter content; instead, it resembled a unique method—a way of educating the entire person by example, engagement, dialogue and collaboration, that is, through distinctly democratic means.[\[viii\]](#) I now turn to a reconstruction of the Dewey-Hutchins debate.

In 1936, the youthful president of the University of Chicago provoked a lively debate over the current state of education in the nation’s colleges and universities. The instrument of provocation was a little book, the published version of Robert Hutchins’ Storrs Lectures in the same year, titled *The Higher Learning in America*. Dewey biographer, George Dykhuizen (1973:279), notes how the uproar over this book and its recommendations percolated into the public discourse: “Hutchins’ proposals created a lively stir among educators, with [educational] traditionalists rallying to their defense and [educational] liberals wondering how ‘a young man connected with the University of Chicago’ could suggest a theory that ‘rejects the essence of every intellectual advance of the last 300 years’” (quoting William H. Kilpatrick). Indeed, Hutchins’ regular appeals to the authority of Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas, and relative disregard for educational methods linked to the empirical sciences, might lead one to suspect that the educational liberals were right. Hutchins (1936:66) states his main argument for a universal general education in these terms: “Education implies teaching. Teaching implies

knowledge. Knowledge is truth. The truth is everywhere the same. Hence education should be everywhere the same” (cited by Ryan 1995:279). Of course, truth and knowledge is almost exclusively delivered by exposure to the great books.

Besides Hutchins’s disdain for the liberal arts college, he also rejected the shift in university studies towards professional education and vocational training. Hutchins (1936:36-7) writes: “The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake is being rapidly obscured in universities and may soon be extinguished. [. . .] . . . soon everybody in a university will be there for the purpose of being trained for something. [. . .] It is plain, though, that it is bad for the universities to vocationalize them [i.e. different areas of the curriculum].” While Hutchins’s critique of vocational education might have been an indirect attack on Dewey’s educational philosophy, especially the short-hand “learning by doing,” such an attack would have been misplaced, for Dewey nowhere advocated vocational training for its own sake. Indeed, Dewey did not identify with any of the main camps in educational policy debates of his times, whether traditionalists, vocationalists or progressives.^[ix] He lamented the artificiality of the liberal/vocational education distinction, seeing it as an unfortunate legacy of the ancients’ separation of theoretical and practical studies.^[x] Besides eliminating professional schools from the university, Hutchins also wished to reduce diversity, or what he calls “disorder,” from the university curriculum, for “all truths,” he says, “cannot be equally important” (95). “Real unity [in the curriculum],” Hutchins declares, “can be achieved only by a hierarchy of truths which shows us which are fundamental and which subsidiary, which significant and which not” (ibid). The unifying subject matter in the Middle Ages was theology. Today, “if we cannot appeal to theology,” because public colleges and universities are secular institutions, then “we must turn to metaphysics” (99). But metaphysics for Hutchins is not simply the speculative study of the non-empirical character of what exists or the familiar area of the Philosophy curriculum devoted to that area of study. Rather, it is a much more important pursuit for Hutchins, important enough to justify a free-standing department dedicated to transmitting the universal truths of the great books.^[xi]

In his initial review of Hutchins’s little book, Dewey conceded that Hutchins had correctly diagnosed the problem with university and college education in America, but disagreed about the proper remedy. Higher education was in decline and did lack a unifying principle. In the review essay, “Rationality in Education,” Dewey takes Hutchins to task for making reason the guiding faculty in designing higher education curricula, a hangover from “Plato, Aristotle, and St. Thomas Aquinas,” leading him to embrace the trivium, but to reject “the sciences . . . [as] unmitigated empiricism . . . the great curse of life” (MW11:391-2). Hutchins’s thesis that human nature is “fixed and constant,” and so “the heart of education,” too, ought to be unchanging is especially noxious to Dewey’s commitment to experimentalism and growth in education (ibid). Acknowledging the forceful critique of vocational and professional studies, Dewey, rather than take up the opposing view, laments that Hutchins’s general education curriculum should be so utterly divorced from ordinary life. Once the natural and social sciences are subordinated to the great books in Hutchins’s “hierarchy of truths,” this “subordination” would produce a curriculum of “permanent studies,” rather than one of “progressive [or experimental] studies” (LW 11:394-5).

Dewey’s second review, titled “President Hutchins’ Proposal to Remake Higher Education,” engages the central claims of *The Higher Learning in America* more directly, particularly that

universities have become too accountable to the public, too corporatized, too progressive, too democratized and too concerned with student retention because of “[l]ove of money” (LW 11:398). Dewey generously acknowledges “that Mr. Hutchins has shrewdly pointed out many evils attending the aimlessness of our present educational scheme,” and he “join[s] [with Hutchins’s] in his desire that higher institutions [of learning] become ‘centers of creative thought’” (ibid). However, agreement quickly recedes from view once Dewey’s inquiry shifts from problem diagnosis to solution. He finds two faults with Hutchins’s goal of liberating the curriculum from empiricism and practicality, from science and vocationalism, so that it shall become an end-in-itself, “intellectuality for its own sake” (ibid). One fault was hinted at in his initial review. Establishing a hierarchy involves not only the selection of “truths that are not to be questioned,” but also demands a selector, a grand priest, a philosopher-king or some other “authoritarian” presence to “determine the definite truths that constitute the hierarchy” (LW 11:399-400).^[xii] Although Hutchins conveniently evaded the question of who chooses the “authoritative principles,” one could not help but imagine Europe’s totalitarian regimes, especially given the historical milieu (late 1930s, when Hitler’s Gestapo had secured control of Germany and the invasion of Czechoslovakia was imminent), the same “fixed authority that,” Dewey claims, “is now overrunning the world” (LW 11:399).^[xiii] The second fault is that by severing higher learning from ordinary life, Hutchins bifurcates the intellectual from the practical, and from everyday experience—demonstrating what Dewey calls a “policy of aloofness” from the social pressures that surround, inhabit and influence institutions of higher learning (LW 11:399). Instead, Dewey recommends a policy of “educational reconstruction,” whereby institutions of higher learning and the scientific community partner for the sake of a wider “social reconstruction,” improving community practice and enriching shared experience (ibid). Although Dewey’s solution is light on specifics and heavy on generalities, Rice’s earlier critique resonates throughout: Educational experience is not monistic; it is pluralistic; and, therefore, no revered fund of fundamental ideas, no singular ranking of universal truths, and no one set of great books will suffice to define the ideal liberal arts college curriculum.

While revealing little that was not expressed in the book and its two reviews, Hutchins’s final exchange with Dewey does highlight how heated their disagreement had become. Dewey asserts that any department of Metaphysics pretending to disseminate the “fixed and eternal truths” would surely be too authoritarian for a free university (LW 11:405-6). Alan Ryan (1995:276, 80) describes Hutchins’s response as equivalent to a “legal brief,” a list of Dewey’s points and a series of terse counterpoints, and Dewey’s riposte as a “short, ill-natured” and “tart reply.”^[xiv] Ryan identifies the crux of Hutchins and Dewey’s disagreement in the unbridgeable divide between subject matter and method. He writes: “Hutchins thought philosophy was an authoritative body of truths, to be approached reverently by the student and teacher alike. Philosophy had to partition the universe with science, each getting its share. Dewey thought of philosophy as a methodology . . . and it is less clear that the division of labor Hutchins has in mind makes sense in such an account” (342). However, this portrayal of the Dewey-Hutchins debate would be a more fitting characterization of the Rice-Hutchins exchange; for unlike Rice or Hutchins, who fall on either side of the method/subject-matter divide, Dewey sought to build a bridge across it.

The best corrective for the commentators’ overstatement of Dewey and Hutchins’ differences is to reveal some significant points of convergence in their pedagogical visions.^[xv] In what

follows, I identify some points of convergence between Dewey's educational philosophy and the Great Books program, particularly that version associated with Hutchins, Stringfellow Barr and Mortimer Adler—not to be confused with the Leo Strauss and Allan Bloom's version.^[xvi] From 1930 to 1948, Adler worked closely with Hutchins to develop the Great Books educational program at the University of Chicago.^[xvii] So, I will treat many of their views as virtually indiscernible.

1. Ontogeny Recapitulates Phylogeny. One way in which Dewey's philosophy *as* education resembles the teaching of great books is in its support for the now discredited theory of recapitulation, or that the development of an individual person imitates the development of the human race—as widely expressed in the saying “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.” First deployed by Etienne Serres in the 1820s, then refined by Ernst Haeckel in the 1860s and finally extended to education by the American Herbartians in the late 1870s, the theory establishes a connection between the development of an embryo and a “pattern of unification” that pervades the organic and social world (Kliebard 2004:16, 2006:122-3). In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey appears to endorse recapitulation as a theory of educational growth: “Because the activities of children today are controlled by these selected and charged stimuli [i.e. curricular materials], children are able to traverse in a short lifetime what the race has needed slow, tortured ages to attain” (MW 9:42). Great books proponents also tend to view proper educational development as a recapitulation process, wherein students begin with the teachings of the Pre-Socratics and work forward to the late medieval authors (Barr 1971, Smith 183). However, Dewey did not subscribe to such a robust version of the recapitulation theory. “The business of education,” he writes in *Democracy and Education*, “is rather to liberate the young from reviving and retraversing the past than to lead them to a recapitulation of it” (MW 9:79) Dewey also warned against an overly literal reading of the theory: “[T]he mere fact that the race has gone through a certain stage of development does not seem to be an adequate basis for inferring that the child not only does go through it, but that we should emphasize or prolong his passing through it” (Dewey 1899/1966:202, cited by Kliebard 2006:123). Instead, Dewey endorsed a thin version of the recapitulation theory, whereby child development loosely resembles the historical accretion of human knowledge; but the parallelism is not thick in the sense that educators would “emphasize or prolong” the stages of learning so that they directly correspond with the stages by which human civilization developed.^[xviii] While it is an area of overlap between Dewey's and the Great Books approach, the thesis that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny becomes a weak descriptive claim, not a strong normative one in Dewey's hands.

2. Commitment to Democratic Education. In 1982, *The Padaiea Project*, headed by Mortimer Adler (1998:295, 2009), was dedicated to Dewey and Hutchins, two scholars, educators and educational reformers who, while disagreeing about the exact way to improve the school curricula, nevertheless found common ground in “their commitment to a democratic system of education.”^[xix] While there is little need to justify the claim that Dewey was committed to democratic education (a quick reading of chapter seven of *Democracy and Education* would suffice to dispel any doubts), one might still wonder whether Hutchins and Adler were more interested in producing an exclusive group of educated elites or an inclusive democratic society of liberally educated citizens. Adler (1998:295) recounts how Hutchins made it known that the great books curriculum would be open to all and for the betterment of democracy:

In the early 1930s President Hutchins was asked whether great books seminars, then open only to a picked handful of students, should be accessible to all the students in our colleges. His brief reply was crisp and clear. He said that the best education for the best was the best education for all. Great books seminars in our public schools and in our colleges should be available to all the students there, not only to the few who elect to take them or who are specially selected.

In *The Higher Learning in America*, Hutchins (1958:19-20) himself declared that, “[d]emocracy should mean that this [Great Books] curriculum from beginning to end is open to everybody. [. . .] Democracy does not require, however, that higher learning should be open to anybody except those who have the interest and ability that independent intellectual work demands.” So, this was also a point of convergence for Dewey and the Great Books proponents.

3. Instrumentalism and Fallibilism Lite. Another area of overlap between Dewey’s educational philosophy and the Great Books program of Hutchins, Adler and Barr is in the department of instrumentalism and fallibilism. Instrumentalism for Dewey is the idea that inquiry directs future experience by matching suitable means to “ends in view,” or intermediate goals, in order to deliver a successful outcome.^[xx] Fallibilism is the belief that whatever the outputs of inquiry, they are always liable to error, leading Dewey to call inquiry’s products “warranted assertions” rather than truths.^[xxi] For Hutchins (1952:47), the great books are tools; he notes, “we have an exceedingly high opinion of them [the great books] as an educational instrument.” Likewise, Adler (1998:296) states that “the great books are . . . useful instruments in the pursuit of truth.” While Dewey disagreed that any educational tools could impart privileged access to the truth, he did believe that through an intelligent process of inquiry, or problem solving, tools could facilitate growth. Although Dewey criticizes Hutchins’s position that the great books divulge “final and ultimate truths,” Hutchins and Adler did concede that the great books contain mistaken ideas as well as correct or truthful ones. Hutchins (1952:48) writes in *The Higher Learning in America*: “Here [in the great books] are the great errors as well as the great truths. The reader has to determine which are errors and which are truths. The task of interpretation and conclusion is his. This is the machinery and life of the Western tradition in the hands of free men.” Likewise, Adler (1998:299) states that “great books, [once] read and discussed with an eye for the basic truths and the equally basic errors or mistakes found in them, should be a part of anyone’s general, liberal, and humanistic education.”

4. Education as More than Schooling. For Hutchins and Dewey, educative growth or development is not limited to formal schooling, and indeed education takes place in adult life, and outside the classroom. Dewey’s position that growth can occur outside the school environment might seem out of character for a university professor. In his words, “The everyday work of the school shows that children can live in school as out of it, and yet grow daily in wisdom, kindness, and the spirit of obedience—that learning may, even with little children, lay hold upon the substance of truth that nourishes the spirit, and yet the forms of knowledge be observed and cultivated; and that growth may be genuine and thorough, and yet a delight” (MW 1:66). Educative growth for Dewey, then, does not appear to depend exclusively on receiving a formal education. For Hutchins, Adler and the other great books proponents, education also happens outside the confines of the school room and the ivory tower. Adler (1998:300) declares: “No one ever becomes a generally educated person in school, college, or university; for youth itself is the insuperable obstacle to becoming generally educated. That is why the very best thing

that our educational institutions can do, so far as general education is concerned . . . is preparation for continued learning by their students after they leave these institutions behind them.” Likewise, in *Democracy and Education*, Dewey insists that education continues past early adulthood:

It is a commonplace to say that education should not cease when one leaves school. The point of this commonplace is that the purpose of school education is to ensure the continuance of education by organizing the powers that insure growth. The inclination to learn from life itself and to make the conditions of life such that all will learn in the process of living is the finest product of schooling.

However, the difference between the two is that the extension of learning beyond formal schooling for Hutchins and Adler is achieved through reading and re-reading the great books; for Dewey, the extension is no final achievement, but instead resembles an ongoing process of learning through living, of exposure to great events and great art, not just great books.

5. Education for the Whole Person. The final point of convergence is that both Dewey and Great Books proponents believe that the locus of education should be the entire person. If learning involves adjustment and adaptation within an environment, then it is the whole person for Dewey that adjusts and adapts, not just the intellect. In *Democracy and Education*, he explored the relationship between the “subject matter” taught and the quality of lived experience. He writes:

Organized subject matter [in schools] represents the ripe fruitage of experiences like theirs [students’], experiences involving the same world, and powers and needs similar to theirs. It does not represent perfection or infallible wisdom; but it is the best at command to further new experiences which may, in some respects at least, surpass the achievements embodied in existing knowledge and works of art (MW 9:190).

For Dewey, the whole person benefits from education, not through learning a stock of fundamental ideas, but through exposure to a diverse range of experiences, whether intellectual, aesthetic or other. For Hutchins (1952:50), the reader of the great books becomes liberally educated, and thus a more well rounded person, who “can understand anything important that is said in any field and can see and use the light that it sheds on his own [field].” So, Dewey and Hutchins were both concerned with educating the whole person; though for Dewey, this process involved designing learning environments that productively channel students’ native impulses through a combination of intellectual and practical activities; while for Hutchins, as well as other Great Books supporters, it is a purely intellectual activity, a matter of studying the great books, the old masters, and appreciating the “tradition of the West . . . [and] the tradition of the liberal arts” (ibid).

Though Dewey at one time wished for a “Back to Plato movement,” he was no fan of the Great Books program or its founders, particularly Mortimer Adler (LW 5:154).[\[xxii\]](#) Still, if we uncritically accept the view that Dewey and Hutchins’ disagreements indicate the absolute incompatibility of their educational ideas, we overlook some ways in which Great Books proponents, Deweyans and others might collaborate in the design of liberal arts college

curricula. In the essay “Education as Socialization and Individualization,” Richard Rorty (1999:123) claims that if students were properly prepared in primary and secondary schools, then

. . . the colleges would not have to worry about Great Books, or general education, or overwhelming fragmentation [of the curriculum]. The faculty could just teach whatever seemed good to them to teach, and the administrators could get along nicely without much knowledge of what was being taught. They could rest content with making sure that teachers who want to teach a course that has never been taught before, or assign materials that have never been assigned before, or otherwise break out of the disciplinary matrix that some academic department has been perpetuating are free to do so—as well as trying to ensure that teachers who might want to do such things get appointed to the faculty.

What happened at Black Mountain College was for the most part what Rorty conjectured would happen if students came to college prepared and faculty could fully exercise their academic freedom. “Faculty [at Black Mountain] were to select their own methods of instruction,” Katherine Reynolds (1988:124) explains, “which might include ‘recitations, lectures, tutorials, and seminars.’” So, pluralism in curriculum design is, and should be, an obstinate feature of any flourishing academic community. One of the first steps in achieving more collaboration between great books proponents and their critics in such a pluralist community, then, is for both sides to admit that there is no fixed ideal that should dictate the content of the ideal liberal arts curriculum. Indeed, we could go one step further and claim that there is no *ideal* liberal arts curriculum, if what we mean by ‘*ideal*’ is an ultimate destination, *telos* or final end. Second, the distinction between subject matter and method should not be treated functionally, not dualistically. To treat it dualistically, and to choose content over method, as Hutchins did, risks alienating those faculty members, such as Rice, who do not rigidly adhere to course syllabi, but make the classroom a space for free-ranging and open-ended discussion and dialogue. Dewey (1966:133) resisted what he called in his 1899 *Lectures in the Philosophy of Education* a “more or less hard and fast separation” between subject matter and method, seeing them instead as inextricably connected in any intelligently designed curriculum. In this way, Dewey’s twin emphasis on educational subject matter and method represents a bridge between those, such as Hutchins and Adler, who saw content as the preeminent concern of curriculum development, and those, such as Rice, who focused largely on method. Third, and lastly, we should heed Dewey, Rice and Rorty’s plea for tolerant pluralism in the design of college curricula, allowing faculty the freedom to develop teaching methods and content as they see fit. Having had two colleagues at different institutions who were great books proponents (indeed, both were former students of St. John’s College), I know from personal experience that such collaboration is possible, though it demands humility, diplomacy and hard work if both parties hope to craft and realize a shared vision.

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Notes

[i] Rice (1942:316) had a similar experience: “When the Rollins affair was over, I resolved not to try teaching any more. I had learned my lesson. I would do something else, unspecified. There was no place for me, I now knew, in any established school or college. That was my decision, and I stuck to it for a long time.”

[ii] Ryan (1995:280) comments: “Hutchins’s view . . . was squarely opposed to Dewey’s.” See also Dykhuizen (1973:279-80) and Westbrook (1991:519-20).

[iii] Black Mountain College’s founders tried to downplay the experimental character of the college and its curriculum in order to reassure parents and recruit more students. The college brochure reads: “Black Mountain College was founded in order to provide a place where free use might be made of tested and proven methods of education and new methods tried out in a purely experimental spirit. There is full realization, however, of the fact that experiment is, for the individual, also experience; hence, no experiment is being tried which is not submitted beforehand to the test of reasonable likelihood of good results.” Cited by Reynolds (1998:123).

[iv] Citations are to *The Collected Works of John Dewey: Electronic Edition*, edited by L.A. Hickman (1996), following the conventional method, LW (Later Works) or MW (Middle Works) or Early Works (EW), volume: page number.

[v] Value judgments can be assessed naturalistically, that is, in terms of whether they permit humans to adapt to their natural and social environment. Dewey (LW 7:285-309) (with James Hayden Tufts), “The Moral Self,” in *Ethics* (1932 revision). They can also be assessed instrumentally, that is, in terms of their efficacy or success in achieving favored ends. Finally, they can be evaluated conventionally, that is, by recourse to widely approved or potentially *approvable* community standards. Dewey’s theory of value requires that we locate the conditions of justification for our value judgments in both the individual’s community (i.e., in terms of standards of general approval) and human conduct itself (i.e., in terms of instrumental efficacy), not in *a priori* criteria, such as divine commands, Platonic Forms, pure reason, or a fixed Aristotelian *telos*. Dewey (LW 5:278-88), “Three Independent Factors in Morals,” and Id. (LW 5:278-88) (with James Hayden Tufts), “Moral Judgment and Knowledge,” in *Ethics* (1932 revision).

[vi] James Scott Johnston nicely makes this point: “Education is the formal means for the development of the habits and attitudes of inquiry such that growth can occur.” *Inquiry and Education: John Dewey and the Quest for Democracy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 110.

[vii] One of Rice’s former students at the University of Nebraska recalls: “Privately, we students used to remark that we were sure, not that Mr. Rice looked like Socrates, but that Socrates must have looked like Mr. Rice.” See Frisbie (1942). Reynolds (1998:93) notes how many fortunate events conspired to create the conditions for Black Mountain College’s founding: “[M]any factors and events . . . combined rapidly and serendipitously during the summer of 1933 to shape some inchoate ideas about higher education—more what it should *not* be than what it should be—into a maverick college that would become one of the most renowned and vital experiments ever to occur in American higher education.”

[viii] In Ritholz’s (1999:349) review of Katherine Reynolds’s biography of Rice, *Visions and Vanities*, he notes that Rice “was concerned more with the process of learning than with the outcome.”

[ix] Kliebard (2004:26) writes: “In the long run, Dewey’s position in curriculum matters is best seen, not as directly allied to any of the competing interest groups, but as something of an integration and, especially, a transformation of the ideas they were advocating.”

[x] In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey writes: “It [the separation of theoretical and practical studies] accounts for the tendency to isolate intellectual matters till knowledge is scholastic, academic, and professionally technical, and for the widespread conviction that liberal education is opposed to the requirements of an education which shall count in the vocations of life” (MW 9:143).

[xi] Hutchins (1936:97) describes metaphysics in the following manner: “In metaphysics we are seeking the causes of the things that are. It is the highest science, the first science, and as first, universal. It considers being as being, both what it is and the attributes which belong to it as being.” See also Hutchins (1934). Adler (1992:29) gives a sympathetic account of Hutchins’s view of metaphysics: “Because of the fact that our secular universities harbor a diversity of religious faiths, Mr. Hutchins placed metaphysics at the summit instead of theology.”

[xii] As Donald N. Levine (2006:77) points out, this is an exaggerated account of Hutchins’s own position: “Hutchins *never* endorsed the view of truth as a fixed body of doctrine that was secured by an elite and imposed dogmatically upon hapless students. He consistently upheld the values of science and scientific observation, the notion that what was considered true was subject to continuous change . . .”

[xiii] Though he does not mention Dewey by name, Adler’s (1992:30) comment on liberal professors’ criticisms of Hutchins’s *The Higher Learning in America* is, nevertheless, a thinly veiled reference to Dewey: “The simplest way to deal with a fellow like Hutchins is to call him a fascist.”

[xiv] See Hutchins's (1937) response and Dewey's riposte (LW 11:402-7).

[xv] I am not the first to notice the parallels between Dewey and Hutchins' philosophies of education. Levine (2006:75) also draws attention to "the convergent ideas of John Dewey and Robert Maynard Hutchins" and acknowledges how "odd" it might seem "to one who knows something about their personal differences and public hostilities."

[xvi] Not all Great Books approaches are identical; nor are they all equal. Indeed, Leo Strauss and Allan Bloom's method of reading and teaching the great books was distinctly different than their predecessors', including the likes of Hutchins, Mortimer Adler, John Erskine, Mark Van Doren, Stringfellow Barr and Scott Buchanan. These Great Books founders developed a "dialectical" and democratic method, in contrast to the more "doctrinal" and elitist "style of reading and teaching the great books" endorsed by Strauss and Bloom (Adler 1998:291). Though one might dismiss this stylistic difference as intramural, the disagreements between them were no less heated than those between Dewey and Hutchins. Indeed, Adler insisted that "the kind of teaching done by Leo Strauss and by his students, among them Allan Bloom, represents in . . . [his] judgment the wrong way to teach the great books in our public schools and in our undergraduate colleges" (297). See also Erskine (1948) and Barr (1971).

[xvii] Indeed, Hutchins' decision to hire Adler as a full professor of Philosophy caused great consternation among members of the Philosophy Department at the University of Chicago, leading to G. H. Mead's retirement and Adler's eventual appointment without departmental affiliation. See Ryan (1995:278) and McNeill (1991). Adler and Mayer (1958:147) would later pit Dewey against defenders of traditional pedagogical methods: "Although Dewey was by no means the first critic of existing educational practices, his was the sharpest, the broadest, the most persistent, and the most influential voice." Hutchins and Adler co-taught a two-year long Great Books course to a small contingent of first-year students at the University of Chicago. According to McNeill (1991:36), Hutchins had made up his mind that the ideal general education curriculum should involve teaching great books, even before he had read them all, due in large part to the influence of Adler: "The proposition that the core of a liberal education ought to rest in firsthand acquaintance with books that had shaped Western literary culture seemed completely convincing to Hutchins even before he made his own acquaintance with a suitable selection of such books through classroom partnership with Adler."

[xviii] Dewey also argues that the recapitulation theory's "biological basis is fallacious" because it proves incompatible with evolutionary theory. He continues: "If there were any strict 'law' of repetition, evolutionary development would clearly not have taken place. Each new generation would simply have repeated its predecessors' existence. Development, in short, has taken place by the entrance of short-cuts and alterations in the prior scheme of growth" (MW 9:78-9).

[xix] Adler (2009:176) claims that "[t]he great American educator, John Dewey . . . first tied these two words [democracy and education] together and let each shine light upon the other." Noddings (2009:180) criticizes Adler's proposal for "linking John Dewey and Robert Hutchins together as though no disagreement separated the two [which] should cause thoughtful educators considerable uneasiness."

[xx] Dewey writes: “Instrumentalism is an attempt to establish a precise logical theory of concepts, of judgments and inferences in their various forms, by considering primarily how thought functions in the experimental determinations of future consequences. That is to say, it attempts to establish universally recognized distinctions and rules of logic by deriving them from the reconstructive or mediative function ascribed to reason. It aims to constitute a theory of the general forms of conception and reasoning, and not of this or that particular judgment or concept related to its own content, or to its particular implications” (LW 2:14).

[xxi] Dewey notes: “There is nothing extraordinary in the assertion that it is human to err” (LW 6:275).

[xxii] Westbrook (1991:518) explains: “Adler was one of the few individuals whom Dewey might be said to have intensely disliked.” The reason for this animosity can be traced back to at least two incidents. Adler (1992:110) recalls in his autobiography: “I wrote adversely critical letters to John Dewey when I attended a course of lectures he gave after he returned from China. They were sufficiently annoying and frequent to cause Professor Dewey to have his assistant ask me to refrain from continuing my letter writing.” The second incident also occurred during Adler’s time at Columbia, here recounted by Levine (2006:76): “As early as 1924, when Adler was Dewey’s student at Columbia, Adler read a paper at a philosophy conference in which he criticized Dewey’s conception of philosophy for leaving out the suprahuman dimension of experience. On that occasion, Dewey uncharacteristically pounded his chair and abruptly left the room.”

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