

Theories of Education in Modern Political Philosophy

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In *Considerations on the Government of Poland and on its Projected Reformation*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau begins the fourth chapter, focused on education, with the following sentence: “This is the important subject” (189). Modern political philosophers, including Rousseau, his predecessor John Locke, and his reader and critic Mary Wollstonecraft revived the ancient interest in education (epitomized by Plato’s extended discussion of education in *The Republic*). Sharing Rousseau’s conviction that education is an important subject in political philosophy--maybe even *the* important subject--I spent the summer reading a wide range of political philosophers on the topic. The works I read fall roughly into two categories: early education and higher education (one outlier is Friedrich Schiller’s fascinating *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*). Throughout my research, I supplemented my reading of primary texts with secondary literature.

In the category of early education, I read Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*; Rousseau’s *Emile, Julie* (excerpts), and some of his shorter works such as the *Discourse on Political Economy*; Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and some of her works of fiction; John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*; and some more contemporary scholarship on education, such as Amy Gutmann’s *Democracy and Education* and Stephen Macedo’s *Diversity and Distrust*. In the category of higher education, I read ardent defenses of liberal education penned by John Henry Newman, Michael Oakeshott, and Leo Strauss, as well as pointed critiques of universities written by Friedrich Nietzsche and Allan Bloom. This debate proved to be fascinating during this exceptional time when higher education is being challenged in entirely new ways. I was particularly compelled by Oakeshott’s discussion of the “inseparability of learning and being human” (*The Voice of Liberal Learning*, 21). Human nature, according to Oakeshott, “stands only for our common and inescapable engagement: to become by learning” (21). Without the Surdna Undergraduate Research Fellowship, I would have never had the remarkable opportunity to read so widely and so deeply on the topic of education in political philosophy.

As my research progressed, I began to focus on early education--specifically moral education and preparation for citizenship. As Rousseau writes in the *Discourse on Political Economy*, “to have them be citizens when they are grown, they have to be taught when they are children” (20). The following questions guided my research: What kind of education creates moral beings? What kind of education forms good citizens? Are these educations identical or different? What role should the family play in educating children? Can the state intervene? Rousseau’s *oeuvre* and Wollstonecraft’s response to Rousseau are particularly rich sources to mine for answers to these, and many more, questions. Both authors emphasize the centrality of the family in the shaping of moral beings and citizens--but they diverge profoundly on topics such as equality within the family and the roles of sentiment and reason. I look forward to focusing on these authors in my honors thesis and bringing them into conversation with contemporary philosophers, such as John Rawls and Susan Moller Okin.

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Works Cited

Oakeshott, Michael. *The Voice of Liberal Learning*. Edited by Timothy Fuller. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Social Contract and other later political writings*. Edited and translated by Victor Gourevitch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.