

# Education as Cultural Inheritance: Using Oakeshott and Dewey to Explore the Educational Implications of Recent Advances in Evolutionary Science

Aline Nardo

*University of Edinburgh*

A new evolutionary paradigm known as “Extended Evolutionary Synthesis” (EES) is challenging current mainstream evolutionary science grounded in the so-called “Modern Synthesis” (MS). MS’s lineage dates back to Darwin and was fleshed out into its current paradigmatic form in the early twentieth century when Darwinism was reconciled with Mendelian genetics.<sup>1</sup> The traditional gene-centred evolutionary model of MS has many critics, including developmental biologists and ecologists, who suggest the paradigm fails to account for how genetic information manifests in the phenotype and the role of non-genetic processes therein.

Among the critics of MS is EES, which is a developing international research program representing a concerted effort to expand MS.<sup>2</sup> One of EES’ main concerns, which I focus on in this essay, is to pluralize MS’ understanding of inheritance.<sup>3</sup> In the traditional MS model of evolution, inheritance is limited to describing the cross-generational transmission of genes. EES, in contrast, highlights the underestimated yet crucial role of “soft” inheritance in evolution, including “learning and cultural transmission” as forms of non-genetic inheritance.<sup>4</sup> Therein, EES provides scientific grounding for the idea that education, learning, and teaching play decisive roles in human evolution.

Importantly, in contrast to well-established accounts of the influence of learning in evolution, thinkers of EES are not viewing learning and cultural transmission as a part of a separate secondary inheritance

system working on top of the primary genetic inheritance system. Instead, they are seeking to integrate the two into a broader, holistic understanding of inheritance. Such a perspective views biological evolution and cultural evolution not as separate processes with a certain overlap but highlights the ways in which cultural transmission and social learning influence evolutionary processes writ large, including the ways in which species evolve genetically.<sup>5</sup>

EES' perspective on inheritance provides a new scientific perspective on education and teaching as forms of "cultural inheritance" with potentially significant impact on the evolutionary trajectory of human culture, society, and even biology. But what does it mean to define education, and teaching in particular, as "cultural inheritance" today? To answer this question, this essay examines the examples of two educational philosophies that foreground some of the core ideas of EES, including its conception of "education as cultural inheritance:" Michael Oakeshott and John Dewey.

Oakeshott and Dewey are interesting for the purpose of this essay's analysis because they do not use the term "inheritance" metaphorically but as part of a larger evolutionary framework. Furthermore, Oakeshott and Dewey represent two philosophies of education that are typically discussed in juxtaposition: the initiation-focused education of Oakeshott versus the experience-centred education of Dewey. Discussing them comparatively, with respect to their distinct understanding of the inheritance function of education, allows me to explore a broader spectrum of meaning potentially attributable to the notion of "education as cultural inheritance."

This essay also asks: Why might it be worth examining EES' perspective in the philosophy of education? The examples of Dewey and Oakeshott show that to think of education as a form of cultural

transmission is not a new idea. What potentially warrants attention about EES' articulation of "cultural transmission" as a form of evolutionary inheritance is the potential power it assigns to teaching and the scientific foundation it offers to support such a view. Teaching, in EES' perspective, is part of our inheritance, working alongside our DNA, shaping who we become as individuals and a species. EES proposes that different forms of inheritance do not merely work in parallel but are interconnected, thus implying that education does not only shape "cultural evolution" but also evolution writ large. This is a potentially interesting perspective with which to discuss the nature and purpose of teaching that stands in contrast to other recent discourses that have reduced the role of teaching to the efficient attainment of predefined performance outcomes.

Parts one, two, and three of the essay detail Oakeshott's and Dewey's particular concepts of "education as cultural inheritance" and discuss them comparatively. Part four discusses the essay's findings and reflects on some of the implications of EES' concept of "education as cultural inheritance" for the philosophy of education.

#### OAKESHOTT'S "INHERITANCE AS INITIATION" PERSPECTIVE

Oakeshott describes being human as a "historic" rather than "natural condition."<sup>6</sup> "Each of us is self-made," he writes, "but not out of nothing, and not by the light of nature."<sup>7</sup> What makes us human – and makes us *as* humans – is not a human essence or "the flowering of a settled potentiality" but our ability to make history and to transmit it across generations through learning (*EF*, 45): "Every human being is born an heir to an inheritance to which he can succeed only in a process of learning."<sup>8</sup>

Oakeshott articulates a particular understanding of culture not as material artifacts but as a plethora of "human achievements" such

as “feelings, emotions, images, visions, thoughts, beliefs, ideas, understandings, intellectual and practical enterprises, languages, relationships, organizations, canons and maxims of conduct, procedures, rituals, skills, works of art, books, musical compositions, tools, artefacts and utensils” (*LT*, 45). According to Oakeshott, to be “initiated into” and to inhabit this “world of facts, not ‘things’” is what it means to be human (*EF*, 73; *LT*, 45).

Oakeshott defines initiation as “a specific transaction . . . between the generations of human beings and postulants to a human condition in which new-comers to the scene are initiated into” (*EF*, 43). Oakeshott ties on to the liberal education tradition. Like other thinkers of that tradition, he takes issue with an education that is “liberated also from an immediate concern with anything specific to be learned” (*PL*, 32). Like R.S. Peters,<sup>9</sup> who argued it is “absurd to think that procedures can be handed on without content,” Oakeshott rejects the idea of an education aimed at abstract skills. A complex society, says Oakeshott, is built on knowledge and understanding, which “is to be encountered, for the most part, in books and human utterances” (*EF*, 48).

Following Oakeshott, education ought to be concerned primarily with the immaterial inheritance of a world “not of physical objects, but of occurrences which have meanings” (*EF*, 44). The inheritance of these occurrences relies on a particular kind of educational transmission aimed not at passive incorporation and regurgitation but “self-identification” and “self-understanding” through the reflective engagement.

Oakeshott emphasizes that the inheritance function of education goes beyond a mere “passing on” of culture. Human self-understanding is “inseparable from learning to *participate* in what is called ‘culture,’” which is not just a selection of cultural artifacts but a richness of “unfinished intellectual and emotional journeyings, expeditions now abandoned but

known to us in the tattered maps left behind by the explorers” (*PL*, 28, emphasis mine). Culture, Oakeshott says, “reaches us, as it reached generations before ours, neither as long-ago terminated specimens of human adventure, nor as an accumulation of human achievements we are called upon to accept, *but as a manifold of invitations to look, to listen and to reflect*” (*PL*, 29, emphasis mine). Through the reflective engagement with material and immaterial expressions of culture we are “called upon” to relate to the past and present of human experience (*PL*, 29). This is how we become ourselves and become human: “To be without this understanding is to be, not a human being, but a stranger to the human condition” (*EF*, 45).

An education understood as an “invitation” to engage with culture is more than a process of “acquiring, storing and retrieving useful information” (*PL*, 21). To inherit culture, Oakeshott argues, “is not acquiring a stock of ready-made ideas” (*EF*, 46). It is an inheritance understood as “reflective engagement” aimed at the recognition of oneself as part of the human species “by seeing [oneself] in the mirror of an inheritance of human understandings.”<sup>10</sup> The educational inheritance of culture, following Oakeshott, is “self-conscious engagement . . . a self-imposed task inspired by the intimations of what there is to learn . . . and by a wish to understand” (*PL*, 22). It is necessarily connected to understanding and using that understanding in the world in a self-determined manner. Learning is not maturation. It is not the discovery of “things” but the transformative confrontation of and engagement with “expressions of human thoughts and emotions” (*PL*, 23).

Oakeshott problematizes an understanding of education aimed primarily at the integration of the new generation into existing social and economic demands. The aim of education, he writes, is not to “produce performers of ‘social’ functions” (*EF*, 60). Instead, Oakeshott articulates

a concept of education as initiation that is detached “from the distracting business of satisfying contingent wants” (*PL*, 28).

### “INHERITANCE AS SOCIAL CONTINUITY” – DEWEY’S PHILOSOPHY OF GROWTH

As a starting point for his philosophy of education, Dewey observes the key role of education in ensuring the “social continuity of life.”<sup>11</sup> “Education, and education alone, spans the gap” between the generations, he emphasizes (*DE*, 7).

Dewey was a thinker ahead of his time who foreshadowed key aspects of EES’ understanding of evolution. In his writings we come across articulations of organisms purposefully turning their surroundings “into means of [their] own conservation” (*DE*, 5), evoking EES’ “niche-construction theory.”<sup>12</sup> Dewey also anticipated EES’ work on “inclusive” inheritance when he argued that the continuity of human life relies on different forms of “renewal”:<sup>13</sup> society “exists through a process of transmission quite as much as biological life” (*DE*, 7), Dewey writes.

Dewey describes the inheritance function of education not merely as the passive adjustment of the new generation to the status quo. Rather, he understands it as an active process of mutual growth by experience, in which the individual learns from interacting with – and purposefully acting upon – her environment and transforms the environment in turn.<sup>14</sup> Based on his focus on experiential learning, Dewey argues that “we never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment” (*DE*, 24). He emphasizes the key role of experience “by various agencies, unintentional and designed” as a vital addition to the transmission of knowledge in formal education settings (*DE*, 15). “The very process of living together educates” (*DE*, 10), he maintains. Dewey urges us to pay attention to and take care of the opportunities for communication and

democratic exchange offered by society at large, or, as Dewey calls them, “the conditions of growth” (*DE*, 15).

Despite his emphasis on the educative nature of everyday interaction, Dewey assigns an important role to formal education in the transmission of culture: “Whether we permit chance environments to do the work, or whether we design environments for the purpose,” he writes, “makes a great difference” (*DE*, 24). Complex societies are built on an enormous accumulation of historical knowledge stored in written symbols. School receives the task to “insure adequate transmission” of these resources that “cannot be picked up in accidental intercourse with others” by providing a “simplified environment.”

This “simplified environment” is not merely a distillate of human culture but is based on a selection of cultural features that “make for a better society” and promote the elimination of “unworthy features” (*DE*, 25). This means that, for Dewey, schools have a dual role in the transmission *and* transformation of culture by providing opportunities for meaningful experiences afforded by carefully selected and curated environments. Dewey preceded Oakeshott’s emphasis on immaterial expressions of culture as crucial parts of our cultural inheritance: “With the renewal of physical existence goes, in the case of human beings, the re-creation of beliefs, ideals, hopes, happiness, misery, and practices” (*DE*, 6). Thus, for Dewey, education is not just about passing on cultural artifacts and practices but also about initiating “seemingly alien beings” into the intangible aspects of what it means to be human (*DE*, 15).

### COMPARING OAKESHOTT AND DEWEY

Although Oakeshott and Dewey are typically associated with opposing educational philosophies, there are obvious parallels between the two.<sup>15</sup> A comparison of the two thinkers with regard to their concepts of “education as cultural inheritance” confirms this.

Oakeshott and Dewey both think of education as necessitated by the facts of mortality and birth. Education makes us human and enables us to create social and cultural continuity across generations. Both understand “cultural inheritance” not as a mere “passing on” of cultural artifacts but as the continuation of an ongoing and open-ended “conversation of mankind” in which culture is both transmitted *and* transformed. Adaptation, Dewey says, “is quite as much adaptation of the environment to our own activities as of our activities to the environment” (*DE*, 53). Similarly, Oakeshott emphasizes that education must not be confused with an “accommodation to circumstances” (*EF*, 74).

Based on this, Oakeshott and Dewey develop relational concepts of experience and learning not as a gradual adjustment to external circumstances but as a process of mutual transformation involving the individual and her surroundings. In his essay “Learning and Teaching,” Oakeshott describes learning as a “paradoxical activity” that combines “doing and submitting” (*LT*, 43), evoking striking parallels with Dewey’s concept of experience as “doing and undergoing” (*DE*, 147).

There are, however, also substantial differences between Oakeshott and Dewey when it comes to their understanding of “education as cultural inheritance.” First, they differ in the significance and role they assign to formal education. Dewey proposes a broad concept of education, including both formal education and educative experiences arising from everyday interaction and communication. The transmission of culture, in Dewey’s view, while relying on formal education, is not limited to schools. Oakeshott, in contrast, argues that proper transmission of culture occurs “when learning becomes learning by study, not by chance, in conditions of direction and restraint.” He defines “education, properly speaking” only as “deliberate initiation of a new-comer into a human inheritance of sentiments, beliefs, imaginings, understandings and activities” (*LT*,



48).

Second, Dewey and Oakeshott disagree on what schools should be for. Oakeshott emphasizes the particular task of “schooling” to provide opportunities for engagement with expressions of culture that are “not immediately connected with the current wants or ‘interests’ of the learner” (*LT*, 48). For Oakeshott, school is a place that offers “engagement to learn something in particular.” Learning in school is not incidental; it is “a specified task [being] undertaken and pursued with attention, patience and determination.” Schools, in Oakeshott’s view, are supposed to “emancipate” the learner “from the limitations of his local circumstances and from the wants he may happen to have acquired” (*PL*, 24).

Dewey, in contrast, defines learning as the “discovery of the connection of things” based on experience. Educative experiences, following Dewey, necessarily tie on to previous experiences, enabling the individual to perceive “relationships and continuities” between past and current experiences (*DE*, 148). However, good teaching, Dewey emphasizes, “appeals to established powers” while also challenging the individual toward new ends-in-view.<sup>16</sup> A Deweyan notion of growth, to use the words of Naoko Saito, is about “growth in expanding circles.”<sup>17</sup> To enable the individual to make reflective connections between past and present experiences – that is, to grow – new experiences have to be connected to previous experiences. Thus, in contrast to Oakeshott’s argument that formal education must be detached from the immediate experiences and interests of the individual, Dewey argues that experiences have to be embedded in the individual’s life context in order to be educative. He writes, “An educational aim must be founded upon the intrinsic activities and needs . . . of the given individual to be educated” (*DE*, 115).

Third, Dewey and Oakeshott draw pronouncedly different con-

clusions regarding the role of the teacher. Dewey thinks that education happens indirectly, via the environment. Education, he argues, is concerned with the direction of experiences, “not with creating them.”<sup>18</sup> Oakeshott, in contrast, argues that if teaching is reduced to the preparation of educational environments, teachers will be “mute presences, as interior decorators who arrange the furnishings of an environment and as mechanics to attend to the audio-visual apparatus” (*EF*, 53). Dewey would most definitely resist Oakeshott’s description of educational environments as a form of “interior decoration.” Nonetheless, he conceptualizes teachers as “mediators of experience,”<sup>19</sup> which contrasts with Oakeshott’s understanding of the teacher as a “master” who has something “to impart,” as a “custodian of that ‘practice’ in which an inheritance of human understanding survives and is perpetually renewed in being imparted to newcomers” (*EF*, 50).

Fourth, Oakeshott and Dewey have different understandings of the role of knowledge in education, what knowledge should be taught, and how it should be taught. Dewey likens education to the process of scientific inquiry. Rather than teaching science as a subject-matter, he argues it should be taught as a method of knowledge production.<sup>20</sup> Oakeshott opposes an education grounded in an empiricist understanding of knowledge as derived “solely from the experience and observation of ‘things’” (*EF*, 55). He believes it overemphasizes accidental discovery produced by interest-directed experimentation and neglects the need for curriculum and the “intangible” aspects of human inheritance, such as morality, sentiment, and beliefs. Oakeshott takes issue in particular with a concept of learning as an incidental occurrence, “a by-product of ‘discovery’” (*EF*, 55). In schools, he argues, the student should be “animated, not by the inclinations he brings with him, but by intimations of excellences and aspirations he has never yet dreamed of” (*EF*, 49). What is taught in schools should not be determined by current usefulness or immediate relevance. Rather, he writes, “an inheritance will contain much

that may not be in current use, much that has come to be neglected and even something that for the time being is forgotten” (*LT*, 48).

## DISCUSSION

In this essay, I have analyzed and compared Oakeshott’s and Dewey’s concepts of “education as cultural inheritance” to clarify the philosophical implications of this notion, which has recently been popularized by proponents of EES. In this section, first, I will discuss the potential significance of Oakeshott for the philosophy of education today. This will include some remarks about potentially fruitful insights gained from a conversation between Oakeshott and Dewey. Second, I will interrogate why we should engage with the perspective of EES in the philosophy of education and what possible implications of such an engagement are.

When discussing the idea of “education as cultural inheritance,” the question beckons: How can we meaningfully discuss “culture,” and how can we transmit it today? Perhaps more than ever, it is vital to re-examine the idea of “canon,” and radically reform long-held perspectives about “dominant culture” in educational discourses and institutions. Curriculum reforms alone cannot “bring liberal education into harmony with the prevailing vision of what it ought to be:”<sup>21</sup> a provider of a coherent and broad non-vocational education for everyone. Instead, new forms of thinking about “culture” and its inheritance are required. The self-proclaimed conservative Oakeshott might seem like a strange contender for the task of renewing the liberal education tradition for today. However, I argue that it might be worth interrogating further the potential contribution of Oakeshott’s concept of “education as cultural inheritance” – which he defines not just as the passive “passing on” of “dominant culture” but as an “ongoing conversation of mankind” – to such a project.<sup>22</sup>

Oakeshott's concept of education as the transformative engagement with "expressions of human thought and emotion" could be challenged for the same reason as Dewey's idea of developing "shared meaning" through communication: the lack of a common language that would allow us to establish consensus about what we value and wish to pass on across generations. Such a challenge is grounded in an understanding of education in which a stable consensus is a prerequisite. For both Dewey and Oakeshott, however, consensus is the unattainable ideal motivating us to continue to listen to each other and express ourselves, which itself constitutes the process of education.

Such an idea of education, as recently readdressed in the *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy*,<sup>23</sup> despite recognizing the unattainability of stable consensus, must be grounded in a belief in the possibility of mutual understanding and "an affirmation of the value of what we do in the present and thus of things that we value as worth passing on."<sup>24</sup> Affirmation, following a post-critical pedagogy, means a commitment to love, care for, and protect what we value in the world, rather than succumbing to an immobilizing "cynicism and pessimism."<sup>25</sup> The required optimism and affirmative commitment can certainly also be found in Dewey, who was unafraid of value judgments about worthy elements constituting positive educational environments. What is different and potentially interesting about Oakeshott's understanding of education as transformative engagement with "expressions of human thoughts and emotions" is that it mirrors the recent advocacy of a post-critical pedagogy to find new ways of defending "subject matter" with the purpose of "initiating the new generation into a common world."<sup>26</sup> However, to be a useful perspective with which to discuss "subject matter" and "canon" today, as pointed out by Maxine Greene, Oakeshott's educational "conversation" must include "women's voices, working class voices, the voices of the oppressed."<sup>27</sup>

Finally, given the fact that in the philosophy of education we already have philosophical frameworks expounding the idea of “education as cultural inheritance,” why should we pay attention to EES in the philosophy of education?

First, historically, evolutionary ideas have had a significant and often underappreciated influence on educational thinking. These influences are often discussed with a lack of nuance when it comes to disentangling how different evolutionary paradigms – for example, Darwinism or Lamarckism – have shaped educational thought.<sup>28</sup> To leave EES’ clear implications to education unacknowledged hinders a critically reflective discussion.

Second, EES’ perspective is worth examining for its potential to open new possibilities for discussing the role of the teacher in the educational transmission of culture. Oakeshott contemplated the profound implications of a concept of “education as cultural inheritance” for how we think about the role of teachers in human evolution. However, “teachers,” he wrote, “are a modest people, and we are likely to disclaim so large an engagement into the civilized inheritance of mankind” (*LT*, 49). EES provides a new basis for Oakeshott’s thesis that teachers are more significant than we generally give them credit for. EES’ understanding of inheritance as both genetic *and* cultural underlines the role of education not just in cultural evolution but also in evolution writ large. By accentuating the key role of schools and teachers in evolution, EES shows potential to provide a new vocabulary for thinking about teaching and its contribution to society.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, we should discuss – and expand – EES’ concept of “cultural inheritance” in the philosophy of education. Not only is it underdeveloped, but it also does not provide an answer to the question: what is it that we want to, or ought to, pass on

through education? As pointed out by a post-critical pedagogy, if we are unable to affirm what we value, education risks becoming instrumental to other ends.<sup>29</sup> Dewey and Oakeshott offer two contributions to such a conversation.

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