Friendship, Philosophy, and the History of Black Education

Campbell F. Scribner

University of Maryland, College Park

Rashad Raymond Moore explores the philosophy of education at historically Black colleges, a topic that he associates with physical health and emotional wholeness, and which he tries to capture in the friendship between John Hope and W.E.B. DuBois at the turn of the twentieth century.[1] There are both risks and rewards in interdisciplinary writing (coming to this exchange as a historian, I am all too aware of them), and I applaud Moore's willingness to use historical sources in making a philosophical point. Although I disagree with some of his interpretation, I think that his essay raises interesting questions for scholars in both fields, particularly around the intangible elements of teaching and learning in Black educational settings.

Underlying Moore's essay is the problem that faced all Black colleges during the late nineteenth century. The vast majority of Black Americans still lived in the rural South, where they confronted poverty, illiteracy, disenfranchisement, and widespread violence. Education promised a path forward, but its character remained undetermined. On one side were those like Hope and DuBois, based at institutions like Morehouse College, who saw liberal learning as the way to jumpstart a Black professional class and agitate for civil rights. On the other side was Booker T. Washington, founder of the Tuskegee Institute, who saw economic sufficiency as a prior condition of social equality, to be cultivated through manual training, personal probity, and political gradualism. Northern philanthropists, intent on modernizing the Southern economy, eagerly bankrolled Washington's vision, which confronted the leaders of Black colleges with the sort of excruciating choices that Moore describes.

Historians have not been particularly kind to Washington. Louis Harlan's *The Wizard of Tuskegee* (1983) portrays him as a ruthless power broker, making or breaking careers with his extensive patronage network, and many scholars continue to reject his moralizing and faith in the free market.[2] However, what-

ever one's final judgment of the Tuskegee model, it is far too easy to caricature Washington, as Moore does, as someone "willing to endure mockery and denigration in the name of money." The ascription of bad faith not only seems unfair but perhaps misses an opportunity to deepen the very argument that Moore is trying to make. For if John Hope struck a devil's bargain by accepting Northern philanthropy, he was hardly alone in doing so. James Anderson's *The Education of Blacks in the South* (1988) finds many Black educators soliciting donations with a mixture of submission and subversion, promising funders that they would offer vocational training while secretly teaching the classics.[3] In *Up From History* (2009), a recent defense of Washington's legacy, Edward Norrell argues that this sort of deception went all the way to the top: that Washington, too, gave generously to civil rights causes and exercised power as progressively as one could in an era of profound racism.[4] Whether or not one finds Norrell's argument convincing, it is important to acknowledge that Washington, Hope, DuBois, and even the philanthropists themselves were stuck "in a precarious position between pragmatic leadership and principle," and that no one dictated the terms of Black education unilaterally.[5] Whereas Moore presents friendship as a private retreat from these unsavory political compromises, in a way it was also their endpoint: after all, only pragmatic leadership could secure the institutional space for college friendships to develop.

The heart of Moore's essay describes the relationships forged at Black colleges in terms of "care," "love," "well-being," "flourishing," and "futurity" and assures readers that "the story of Black education is not all dismal." A similar perspective has driven histories of Black education since Thomas Sowell's *Education: Assumption vs. History* (1986)—a book that comfortably combines Black excellence with Washington-style moralism—and Vanessa Siddle Walker's *Their Highest Potential* (1996). Both of those books document academic success at otherwise inferior segregated schools, a surprising record that they attribute to community oversight, high expectations, and dedicated teachers.[6] Subsequent studies have extended their findings to other eras and locations, and although most of them do not make philosophical arguments *per se*, their emphasis on agency, community, excellence, and love is very much in line with Moore's. All

of this suggests the descriptive value of Moore's approach, but it also begs the question of what his philosophizing might add to existing historical accounts?[7]

I think that Moore has a great deal to add, but I wonder whether it would come across more clearly in a slightly different register, one less often applied to Black education. Specifically, with all of his talk about practical judgment, friendship, and flourishing, would it make sense to tell the story of Hope and DuBois from an Aristotelian perspective?

Like proponents of care, Aristotle offers an ethical system grounded in everyday practice and the development of human potential. He devotes two books of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to friendship, which he considers inseparable from the good life. If not a virtue in itself, Aristotle claims that friendship encourages excellence in the context of human sociability:

> Rich men and those in possession of office and of dominating power are thought to need friends most of all; for what is the use of such prosperity without the opportunity of beneficence, which is exercised chiefly and in its most laudable form towards friends? ... And in poverty and in other misfortunes men think friends are the only refuge. It helps the young, too, to keep from error; it aids older people by ministering to their needs and supplementing the activities that are failing from weakness; those in the prime of life it stimulates to noble actions — 'two going together'—for with friends men are more able both to think and to act.[8]

When DuBois recalls his "closest and most holy friendships…strengthening and hardening [his] own character," he is making an Aristotelian claim. And when Hope observes that friendship "is based not so much on agreement in opinion and policies and methods but upon downright confidence, upon simple faith," or that it develops between those who share "common interests, visions, and values," he echoes Aristotle's equation of friendship with democracy and social equality.[9]

Finally, there are at least two ways in which an Aristotelian perspective may be able to do what care alone cannot, and I would like to conclude by

posing these as general questions to Moore.

First, what exactly did "flourishing" mean in the context of Black colleges? Surely there were caring teachers and lifelong friendships at places like Tuskegee just as there were at Morehouse, and valuable learning experiences even at schools that did not instill academic success. Did flourishing merely require fellow-feeling and emotional affirmation or was it necessarily oriented toward intellectual growth? Was it dependent on the formal curriculum or incidental to it? Was it best judged by the "progress of the race" or by degrees of individual self-realization? Many of the same questions underlaid the debate between Washington and DuBois, and of course there are many ways to answer them. But whether one hopes to discriminate between various models of Black education or to find deeper affinities between them, it seems necessary to have a sense of their proper educational aims. To describe Washington, Hope, or DuBois as practical reasoners means little if we do not know what they were reasoning toward. Thus, while Moore is right to sidestep conventional interpretations of their debates, reengaging them as the ordering of educational goods may be one area (in addition to friendship) where Aristotelian philosophy could clarify the terms of historical analysis.[10]

Second, the beauty of the Black intellectual tradition in the United States is how productively it not only echoes but *talks back* to other schools of thought. I wonder whether, in applying the ethics of care to his study, Moore actually finds too neat a fit, and could have challenged existing thinking by reaching farther afield? Surely other philosophical approaches could benefit from the story he tells? There have been cursory references to Black schooling among neo-Aristotelian philosophers, for example, but their language does not seem to encompass the kind of "spiritual fortitude" and "ensouling" that Moore finds at Morehouse.[11] In addition to Cornel West, whose work Moore cites, possible models for this kind of work include Danielle Allen's *Talking to Strangers* (2004), which argues that Black history offers a unique understanding of self-knowledge and sacrifice in the political sphere; and Vincent Lloyd's *Black Natural Law* (2016), which finds contemporary natural law theory lacking compared to traditionally Black invocations of reason, emotion, and transcen-

dent moral standards.[12] As he elaborates on this research, I would encourage Moore to use philosophical concepts not only to explain a particular historical moment, and not only to carve out space for Black education itself, but also to leverage Black colleges in broader discussions about friendship and flourishing in education writ large.

All this is to say that Moore adds a sensitive and promising perspective to an already vibrant scholarly discussion, and I look forward to learning more from his work in the future.

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1 All citations of the original manuscript are Rashad Raymond Moore, "I Brought Him Here to Be My Friend: Hope, DuBois & Friendship in Historically Black Education," *Philosophy of Education* 77, no. 4 (March 2022).

2 Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901-1915* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1983). For a contemporary example, see Brian Jones, "Washington and Canada: Free Market Idealism in the Context of Social Defeat," *Journal of Negro Education* 87, no. 1 (2018): 33-45.

3 James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

4 Edward Norrell, *Up From History: The Life of Booker T. Washington* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009).

5 On the shifting motives and strategies of Black educational philanthropy, see Eric Anderson and Alfred A. Moss, *Dangerous Donations: Northern Philanthropy and Southern Black Education, 1902-1930* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999).

6 Thomas Sowell, *Education: Assumptions Versus History: Collected Papers* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1986); Vanessa Siddle Walker, *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

7 Recent examples include Kabria Baumgartner, *In Pursuit of Knowledge: Black Women and Educational Activism in Antebellum America* (New York: New York

University Press, 2019); Jarvis R. Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021); Michael Hines, *A Worthy Piece of Work: The Untold Story of Madeline Morgan and the Fight for Black History in Schools* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2022); Crystal Sanders, *A Chance for Change: Head Start and Mississippi's Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Russell Rickford, *We Are an African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016); Jon N. Hale, *The Freedom Schools: Student Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016); and the essays in Ansley T. Erickson and Ernest Morrell, eds., *Educating Harlem: A Century of Schooling and Resistance in a Black Community* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2019).

8 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 142.

9 For more on schools as cultivators of civic friendship, see Elisabeth Hansot, "Civic Friendship: An Aristotelian Perspective," in Larry Cuban and Dorothy Shipps, eds., *Reconstructing the Common Good in Education: Coping with Intractable American Dilemmas* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 173-185.

10 Notably, David Carr has recently taken Aristotelian theorists themselves to task for offering vague accounts of human flourishing. David Carr, "Where's the Educational Virtue in Flourishing?" *Educational Theory* 71, no. 3 (2021): 389-407.

11 For instance, Alasdair MacIntyre references protests to preserve "underperforming" schools in Chicago to illustrate community standards of judgment. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 203.

12 Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education* (University of Chicago Press, 2004); Vincent W. Lloyd, *Black Natural Law* (New York. NY: Oxford University Press, 2016).