

Kieran Egan  
Simon Fraser University

Imagine you are an Athenian man among a group of your fellow citizens about two and a half thousand years ago. Ahead of you, and slightly raised, is a stone altar, beside which wood burns and crackles in a shallow pit. Smoke is also rising from a hole in the altar at the end farthest from the pit. A meticulously groomed heifer is being led towards the altar by two men whom you know. It kicks and moos, startled by the fire and the silent crowd, but is firmly forced up the steps. The priestess raises her arms, praises the wisdom of the goddess Athena, and asks Her to accept this pure sacrifice and to enjoy the rich smell of its burning meat. The blade of a long knife flashes down into neck of the heifer. There is a momentary squeal, then silence as its legs give way. The animal is expertly butchered. Its entrails are scooped into long bowls and placed before the priestess on the altar while the carcass is tossed into the burning pit. The priestess pours a cup of wine onto the hissing sacrifice.

As the carcass continues to sizzle, you and your fellow-citizens stand silent, watching the priestess swiftly cut away the liver and tip the remaining entrails into the smoking hole in the side of the altar. They add pungently to the smell that most delights the gods. The priestess dissects with care, and all eyes watch her intently. After a few endless minutes, her bloodied hands hold up pieces of the liver. She shouts that it is unspotted, that the goddess Athena is pleased with the sacrifice, and that Athena guarantees success in battle against the Corinthians. A great shout goes up. The goddess has supported those who proposed war and rejection of the peace treaty some had favored.

Later, when the burned meat, which Athena most savors, is cut away, and after the priestess's portion is set aside, you and your companions will also receive a small share of the heifer's meat. If, as you enjoy eating it with a bowl of wine around a table with your friends, you suggest to them that cutting up an animal and examining its entrails is not a particularly good way for making foreign policy decisions, you would, of course, be considered crazy. If you

persisted in saying that the ceremony you had just been through seemed an unlikely best procedure for running the state, and argued that the condition of heifers' livers had nothing to do with the wisdom or otherwise of going to war, you would be faced with the incredulity of your audience and then perhaps with their hostility. They would likely respond to you patronizingly with their own common-sense arguments.

How else, they would say, do you propose to discover the will of the goddess? The priestess is highly trained, with many years of skilled experience in discovering and interpreting the data. She has a Ph.D. in haruspication from rocky Chios; it is a complex and refined science and provides the most effective methodology for reaching the best political and social decisions. The liver of heifers is known to be the most reliable source of relevant information.

The problem with trying to continue this argument, of course, is that those you wish to argue with take as beyond question precisely what you want to question. They consider themselves common-sense realists because they are intimately familiar with how things are and how they work. If you press your case, the kinder among the group will smile at each other and, when you aren't looking, tap their heads to indicate you are an echinas and hypotrachelion short of a column or not the sharpest adze in the tool-shed.

Now imagine that you are an historian two and a half thousand years in the future. Your special area of study is the distant period between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twenty-first centuries, and you are composing a thesis about a peculiar institution found in every modern society of that time. The school existed as a central institution of what were then considered modern states for just over two hundred years, beginning roughly in the mid-nineteenth century. You are trying to explain, in a clearer way than anyone before you, how such an institution could have come into being in the first place and could have survived so long—despite people at the time constantly complaining about its ineffectiveness.

Your thesis is that twentieth and twenty-first century people, even though they conducted endless inquiries and commissions and task forces into schools' ineffectiveness, simply failed to identify what was the fundamental problem.

Most reformers were intent on insisting that some particular changes would make the system, finally, more effective. They seemed unable to recognize that the real problem lay in what they so took for granted that they never questioned it. You are thinking of preceding your thesis with an quotation from Ludwig Wittgenstein, a philosopher contemporary with the schools of your research: “one must uncover the source of error otherwise hearing the truth won’t help us.” A part of your difficulty in composing your argument is that those who will view it, spread across eight star systems, find it incomprehensible that anyone could ever have believed such an institution provided a sensible way to educate children.

One problem for the schools you are studying was built in from the earliest time; this was the belief that learning certain kinds of knowledge made you a more virtuous person. So, learning advanced geometry, say, didn’t just mean you knew more geometry than an uneducated person, but that your mind had been made superior in some way. And having a mind made superior by much knowledge enabled you to be a better citizen and better person in general. Such an idea persisted for a long time in those countries which drew on Greek ideas about education, encouraging those who were schooled in privileged forms of knowledge to think of the uneducated classes of their own country as ignorant, boorish, and brutish, and to see people from societies that did not even use writing and had no literate stores of knowledge as primitive or savage.

You have to explain how nearly everything anyone might want to do to or for children became the school’s job. The young of each country became captives within specially designed buildings, sitting more or less docilely in age-sets, available for whatever the state or influential interest groups wanted to try. And all kinds of things were tried. Everyone wanted the best for the children; it’s just that ideas about what was best were often quite different. So some people still believed that certain forms of knowledge or of literature would make children more virtuous, others didn’t; some wanted to teach them to accept certain beliefs and values and others wanted to teach them to be critical of the beliefs and values foisted on them; some wanted them to follow a careful curriculum towards disciplined knowledge and others wanted them to explore the world of knowledge

for themselves following their own interests; some wanted to teach the practical skills that would enable children to get good jobs after school and others wanted them to concentrate on opening their minds to the arts; most people wanted all of these to be successfully provided by the school.

Well, let us leave our ancient Greeks eating their roasted heifer, anxious and excited at the prospect of war, and our historian preparing for her morning's work, feeling the warmth of distant Sirius rising and obliterating the sight of the five moons currently in the sky. I have dragged you through these past and future scenarios—if you're still with me—to suggest, perhaps over-dramatically, that our problems with the school are more fundamental than people today generally believe. To read most books about education, you would get the idea that some particular reform—more attention to “the basics,” more freedom for children's exploration, voucher systems and market disciplines, greater use of technology, and so on—would make the school work satisfactorily. The problem lies elsewhere, I think, and fixing it requires of us the tougher task of reframing the idea of education we have inherited from ancient and more modern Europe and its tangled history.