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Title	What is a school: How to study an educational institution
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Source	<i>ERAS Conference, Singapore, 29-31 May 2006</i>
Organised by	Educational Research Association of Singapore (ERAS)

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# What Is A School: How To Study An Educational Institution<sup>1</sup>

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## A School

It is 6 am in the morning. The first school bus arrives to unload its passengers—young boys and girls, some weighed down by a heavy backpack. Other students begin to saunter through the gate to begin a new day. Teachers rush about classrooms and the staff rooms, preparing to deliver lessons on arithmetic, languages and the sciences, and the principal walks about to ensure all is in order, before returning to the office to sort out the pile of administrative duties awaiting his attention—all this with a view to ensuring that students succeed on obtaining an educational certificate, which will in turn either enable entrance into a higher educational institute, or perhaps obtain a job, pay for meals, support entertainment, live, and live well... This is a familiar scene. This is a school.

Elsewhere in another part of the world something like this is happening. Students come in much earlier. Teachers and pupils organize themselves. Some huddle in the cold, while others adjust the holsters in which their heavy machine guns nest. They sit in rooms where chalk boards describe maps of surrounding jungles and instructors explain how best to surprise and survive. Now and then a man walks about to punish the distracted child and to enforce desirable behavior. This scene may be less familiar, but nonetheless exists. And this too is a school.

## Schools Alike and Different

Unlike the one described in the previous paragraph, this school prepares children to fight a war, and to survive in it, but like the one above the participants (students, teachers, administrative personnel...) coordinate themselves to teach and to learn. These two descriptions of schools, at once *alike in some respects and different in other respects*, do not exhaust the *analogous* versions of a “school”.<sup>2</sup> We can imagine many other schools. There are those which focus on teaching dance, or music, or painting, instead of mathematics and science. Other schools teach the same things our school would teach, but perhaps less or more effectively. Still others have more teachers, and have more students, and are better equipped than another.

When confronted with all the reality that there are so many kinds of schools, and so many ways a school can be a school, how can we better understand what schools are?

We could go about describing each school, and someone with a good eye for detail would quite accurately articulate every possible nook and cranny. We could collect each of

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is part of a monograph I am working on.

<sup>2</sup> See John Finnis, *Aquinas*, (NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 42-47

these detailed descriptions and compile them into a kind of an encyclopedia, or school directory. This may be one way to proceed. Yet such a “stamp collection” of schools may not be very useful. Whilst this may be a fine leatherbound collection of facts, not everything in it is significant or illuminating. For: not everything in such a collection is worth knowing. Not everything is important.

Indeed, for participants in the educational industry, whether teachers, school administrators or leaders, or policy makers, thinking about a “school” is not collecting and accumulating trivia. The description of a school which is for us significant is relative to *what we think is important*.<sup>3</sup> For: we are interested in and value data about schools which serve and serve well these important object(ives). So a description of how a military school is run and what it consists of is not going to be important for someone who thinks that there will never be war, and that military defense is not important. If on the other hand someone imagines his country constantly under threat of invasion, then understanding how a school which services military training becomes illuminating. As it is, schools which are *means for* (through being effective and relevant) achieving these important ends come to be worth our analysis and investigation.<sup>4</sup>

How then shall we proceed? Which “school”, then should we describe, study, understand...*know*? To answer that question we have to articulate what is important. Because these important objects will enable us to identify which “school” is worth studying and understanding. After all, such a school will be precisely that “school” which serves as the means for achieving these important objects. Thus, if dance is important, the “school” which is illuminating will be that which describes the teaching and learning of dancing, compared to another “school” which is concerned with teaching carpentry. Again, if science is important, then we would find the description of a “school” which has a curriculum of biology, chemistry and physics more significant than another one which exists merely to develop athletes—even if its programme of physical training is very well researched and thought through.

### The Central Case of a School

In other words, the fruitful way to proceed is to describe, study, analyze and understand that *one* “School” which exists in order to serve well those important ends or objects, whatever these important ends are. This School may or may not exist presently in reality. But its description is no less real. For we can detail its blue-print, and it can then be realized in the concrete. Yet for participants in the business of education, it is this very School which will be significant to know and understand. And it is significant because it will detail, on top of the many things that schools generally do, those *very things this very School will have or do to promote, develop, remedy, protect, etc...the important things*. After all, what is important, apart from what is already important of itself, are also the very *means* to achieve these important ends.

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<sup>3</sup> See John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 3-9

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-18

Scattered conceptually around and about this School will be other “schools” which share some of its characteristics, but not all. These other schools are no less schools, but they will not be as significant for the social theorist (teachers, educational leaders, policy makers...) interested in educational institutions. For compared with the School, these other schools will be defective in servicing the ends that are important in the judgment of the social theorist. So the School stands at the centre of the many possible instantiations of what may be a school as its preferred type of school. In relation to all these many various schools, the School is the *ideal*, or the *standard to match*. Let us call this School the *central case*, following a familiar term already applied in jurisprudence.<sup>5</sup> Thus the central case of a school is merely that school which best instantiates the ideal version of what a school is.

From this it becomes even clearer why our description of the School is significant and illuminating. As it is, this description of the School is at the same time also prescriptive.<sup>6</sup> Why is that the case? Because: what we have here is a description of a standard, a preferred type of school. It is what any school *ought to be*. If any school matches it, it would instantiate our ideal. If on the other hand, if any school falls away from this School, then such a school would be less desirable, poorer, less perfect, less preferred... And the further a school is from the School, the less desirable it is. In this way we are able to judge, with reference to the School, whether any particular school is a mature, developed, sound, desirable, preferred school or an immature, undeveloped, imperfect, peripheral, corrupt school. And for the latter, we are able to advise and device strategies to *align it towards, craft it in the direction of, reform it and urge it to model itself after the School*. The School, being a central case of a school, is what all other schools in its periphery *look up to*.

### Who's Values?

So far so good. But there still is one more consideration. Amongst policy makers, teachers, principles, administrators, head of departments, lecturers, professors, social theorists, even students and parents, etc, i.e., all the participants and stakeholders of the school, there will be different estimates of what is important. Therefore, it would follow, there will be differing judgments on what a School, designed as it were to promote and defend these important things, would look like. A Professor who thinks highly of the arts would think of a School (or indeed, University) which has some form of artistic programme for its students, or a school which is at least open to having such programmes, pending available resources. An economist or politician, whose primary concern may be the economy, may look to market demands for a judgment on what really is important, and argue that the School should nurture and develop students which will be able to service the demands of the market. A teenager, for whom having pleasurable experiences may be the foremost and only thing on his mind, may be concerned to insist that the School will offer facilities and programmes that will satisfy his appetite for fun and excitement, and exclude in his concept of the School other elements which detract from these experiences. Therefore, *depending on whose judgments* we are to adopt, we will

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<sup>5</sup> See John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> John Finnis, *Aquinas*, op. cit., 34

arrive at rather different central cases of a school. Put it another way, depending on *what* these judgments are, so will the School be.

Now some persons have sound judgments of what are important. Others may not. Clearly, we have no reason to consider and take seriously the judgments of those whose estimate of what is important is incorrect and erroneous. Indeed, we have to avoid these judgments. After all, in describing the central case of a school, we are not after a mirage. We are after a school which is truly in its central case, and not one which merely *appears* to be. So we have to be very careful. Not everyone's judgment should be entertained, but only the judgment of those whose grasp of what is important and what is not important is sound and correct.

So whose judgments are we to attend to, with which to craft our School? Naturally, the judgments of those who are *sound* with regard the important and the unimportant—whose judgments stand up to critical scrutiny and reflection, and whose judgments are not whimsical and arbitrary. So we need to identify these people (including ourselves), and expose and disregard those who mistakenly believe themselves to have these sound judgments. And we do that precisely through identifying those sound or unsound judgments these people may have. In this way, by attending to the various judgments and submitting them to critical reflection, we are able in one and the same exercise to surface the sound (or flawed) judgments and the person who has these judgments. For judgments about what or is not important can be examined, and those which are reasonable can be identified and adopted, and those which are unreasonable can be exposed and disregarded.

### What is Important?: Natural Law Theory

Natural law theory offers just such an account of what is and is not important, and natural law theorists invite critical reflection to prove the soundness of their account. For the natural law theorist, the things and objects that are important are the basic goods. These are the goods, ends, objects, states of affairs that are valuable in themselves and are worth seeking. They are the good of life, truthful knowledge, friendship, religion, aesthetic experience, skillful play and moral soundness (practical reasonableness).<sup>7</sup>

Knowledge is a good, and is important. So is friendship, and life, as well as religion, or play, or aesthetic experience, or practical reasonableness (otherwise moral soundness). For the natural law theorist a school in its central case will see to these basic goods. There will be a place to detail the way (through its coordinated acts, teaching, organizing, etc) these goods are serviced: in who, in what manner, where, how, when...and also to engage philosophical challenges from other axiologies, such as those of the relativists<sup>8</sup>, utilitarians<sup>9</sup>, free market theorists (Mengerians)<sup>10</sup>, and so on. But due to the given

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<sup>7</sup> See John Finnis, *Fundamentals of Ethics*, (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> Relativist deny any stable, objective articulation of what is important

<sup>9</sup> Classical utilitarians argue that in the final analysis what is important is (the experience of) pleasure.

<sup>10</sup> Mengerian free market economists argue that the value of something is the market value (of something relative to the consumer.) This interpretation may be open to debate, but what is important here is to note that the things the market values may not be objectively valuable. There is a market for drugs and

perimeters of my presentation, I will not go into these. Today, I will spend the rest of the essay, indeed these final paragraph sketching out what a school, which is attentive to all these basic goods, may look like. Such a sketch will not be exhaustive, but it will at least pick out some salient aspects of such a school.

### The *Ethos* of the natural law theorists' School

Let me start by pointing out what cannot be done. We cannot detail exactly the one right way or ways such a school will exist. This is because, even for the central case, some details cannot be articulated. Consider our central case of a school. Our school will see to the basic goods. Through its teaching and curriculum, we may say that it will steer its programme towards the promotion of basic goods in the students (but not merely students, but also in relation to employees, teachers, etc). Hence the subjects and programmes it offers should be those which may develop skills and capacities that enable students at present and in the future to live well, develop deep and lasting friendships, and communicate and know the truth. But what kinds of books to use, how big classrooms should be, where toilets should be located—these will depend on other facts such as resources available, the kinds of students one has, and the architectural structure of the premises. These things will inevitably vary from school to school. What can be articulated, perhaps, is a kind of *ethos*<sup>11</sup>—the attitudinal stance or practical posture—of that school. The *ethos* will, of course, determine how the school will turn out.

### An Ethos of Openness

Some examples will give you what I mean. If we think that all these basic goods are indeed goods, or important, then my suggestion is that there will be a fundamental *ethos of openness* towards *all* of these goods. Hence there will not be any (unreasonable) denial of the importance of any of these goods, through suggesting that they are not important and not worth our consideration to be integrated into the school structure and its activities. Nor can there be any theoretical attempt to suggest that we should prefer one good over another (and so justifiably ignore one for the other). This is because there is no way to commensurate these unique goods, and judge that one is better than another. They are all uniquely attractive. Hence when considering what to teach or to include in our curriculum, all those subjects which are useful for promoting or developing capacities in our students to participate in these goods will be given consideration, and not willfully ignored.

Hence for instance, if we think that aesthetic experience is important, we may be very open to including in our curriculum (and take seriously, not merely as lip-service) some aspect of aesthetic education, such as through art courses or music lessons. Now one may not offer such classes because one *cannot*, for lack of time, resources or appropriate teachers, or other logistical limitations. (Indeed, if we are to coordinate a school day, or

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pornography, some of which can be very expensive, for example, but these are arguable things that are precisely not valuable, in the sound and important sense.

<sup>11</sup> See Terence McLaughlin, “The Educative Importance of “Ethos”, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol 53 (3), 306-325

term or week, and given that each day is but a certain number of hours, and students have only a limited number of days, weeks and months with us, we cannot possibly do everything, and offer every good programme. Indeed when we offer something in dance, we may have to give up art, or drama. Or if we decide to do science experiments or play sport for the week, art will necessarily have to be neglected.) But saying that we cannot offer these is one thing. And this is not the same as saying that one who *will not* consider and offer these courses, even if time and resources are available. The first is a posture of openness to these goods, limited nonetheless by realistic considerations. The second is an unreasonable and principled rejection of these goods as goods. A school which has the latter (unsound) ethos, may have the culture of despising an education in the aesthetics. It will articulate (one may imagine) and share notions that cultural and art lessons is time wasted, absolutely speaking—unless such lessons may translate into benefits for other basic goods, such as life (through enabling one to secure a good job, more money, etc).

### Philosophy and the Raffles Programme

Another example. A school which takes seriously the intrinsic (and not merely instrumental) value of knowledge will be open to programmes which promote knowledge for its own sake. Being a philosopher myself and having been a member of the Philosophy Centre at Raffles Girls' (Secondary) School (RGS) I will say a good word or two about that in relation to my point here.

Since the 1980s, RGS has run the Raffles Programme, which integrates philosophical learning as an aspect of its compulsory curriculum. Now what is interesting to me is that in its philosophical vision, it explained the need for philosophical education not merely in instrumental terms but with a view to nurturing students who are “thinkers”. My own conversations with Mrs Shirley Tan, the Vice-principal of RGS give me the clear impression that their educational aim in having philosophy is so that students can learn to become independent, critical thinkers. And I might add, *period*. Now there is no denying that a capacity to think well is *useful* for a whole lot of other expedient affairs—not least so that when the child graduates to Raffles Junior College she can do well in Knowledge and Inquiry, with all its academic and *career* implications. Nonetheless, it seems that the vision of the Raffles programme and its related philosophical education is not merely for that (if at all); it values a capacity to reflect critically (and hence, to know the truth—for what else does *critical thinking* aim to do) just in itself. My judgment is that the ethos, shared and communicated by the leadership of its principals, is a fundamental openness to truthful knowledge, understood as something intrinsically valuable.

When one examines the philosophy curriculum this becomes even more manifest. For students doing philosophy study not merely critical thinking, but (to the extent that they can) a little of philosophical metaphysics, which deals with speculative truths about ultimate reality. Now for some this kind of knowledge is not relevant—but this is precisely, even if paradoxically, its virtue. For some knowledge is worth knowing for its own sake, even if it does not produce something external to the knower in the end. But

that is not to say that nothing has changed, or no profit is begotten, since the knower is himself altered: his grasp of truth is itself the benefit. While philosophy teachers (like myself) often (are compelled) to explain and demonstrate the relevance of philosophical thinking, it may not be altogether a bad thing, I suggest, that some philosophical learning be left irrelevant, and students are invited to know just for knowing's own sake. But this may be open to debate.

In any case, my point is this: in the case of the good of truthful knowledge, a school which has some form of philosophical component or programme suggests that it has a sound ethos with respect to the intrinsic importance of knowledge. In the case of RGS, I see clearly this ethos. The ethos I call the "community of inquiry" ethos, a term I have adopted from the Philosophy for Children (P4C) movement. This is because the P4C movement's concerted effort to craft communities of inquiry in schools presupposes the basic premise that philosophical knowledge sought for its own sake is valuable. By contrast, a school ethos which is unsound would reject as pointless and a complete waste of time, such programmes. For them, the question is not one of resources; rather, theirs is a principled stance misinformed by the erroneous and flawed vision of what is important and worth promoting and pursuing.

### Evaluation and Ranking of Schools

One last idea. Now I mentioned just earlier in the paper that the description of the school in its central case is both descriptive *and prescriptive*. And this is because such a School is the standard, the ideal type around which falter other peripheral, undeveloped, defective instantiations of what a school is. I want to bring this knowledge to bear on policies regarding ranking and evaluation of schools.

For quite some time now we have ranked schools, and this is of course useful. Comparing schools gives us an idea of which is a better school and how I could, in relation to that standard, improve my school. Yet in evaluating and ranking schools, should not the criteria be nothing other than the school in its central case? Indeed it should be, since the central case of a school is but the standard, the best case and most sound instance of what a school is. But for a long time now the ranking criteria has been dominated by academic results, which is of course important. Results give an indication of how well students have been educated, and the central case of a school will certainly feature good academic results—*and more*. For the central case of a school will have, as I have argued, the sound ethos of openness to the basic goods, and hence will exhibit *relevant expressions (and hence indication of the presence) of this ethos*. Given that some schools offering the integrated programmes no longer offer the O-levels, perhaps the consideration of school ethos becomes an even more important criterion in evaluating and comparing schools. And thus, the presence of indicators of the ethos of openness (such as the having of philosophy centers, cultural programmes, moral education centers, etc) should be taken as signs of excellence.

I end my paper here and open to the floor for discussion.