

Philosophy of Education as a Tool for Understanding

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In a sense such a course as Education 381 is an introduction to educational philosophy. It gives an opportunity to seek consistency to the solutions which you will develop for the problem in the operation of a school system. It is sometimes suggested that every one has a philosophy of life and that every teacher has a philosophy of education. For a truly professional consideration of education, and even for satisfactory consideration by the

concerned layman, more systematic study is necessary.

In the years since 1900, there have been two approaches to the development of a systematic or consistent view of the role of the school in American society. One has involved a listing of what appeared to be the problems of the school and then of stating principles which would seem consistent and appropriate to those problems. The second has involved a reference to currently held positions within the general field of philosophy for principles which can then be applied to the problems of education. The first was the more frequent until about 1945, the

second, which we might call the comparative, has been more popular in recent years.

From the field of philosophy there are seven areas which seem to have relevance to the concerns of the educator. They are metaphysics, epistemology, axiology, aesthetics, ethics, politics, and logic. Well-developed or systematic philosophies such as Idealism, Realism, Pragmatism, and Thomism have been developed to provide consistent solutions to basic problems identified in these areas. (In addition to the highly developed positions described in these four schools, recent developments in philosophy have given rise to new schools of Reconstruction, Existentialism, Linguistic Analysis, and Logical Positivism.) The basic problems identified by the philosophers are also the basic problems of the educational philosophers. The obvious advantage of using these systems is that much of the growth which the educational philosopher would otherwise need to cover for himself has already been

covered by the philosopher. There is no point in losing the insights already available.

One of the problems which must be faced by the student of one field when he moves into the serious consideration of another field is the problem of vocabulary. It may not be necessary in a first course in education to be able to define such words as metaphysics, epistemology, axiology, or ontology because the instructor or the textbook writer will probably do it for you. Serious and more independent study in the area requires a willingness to do so. Similarly the independent student of education seeking additional insight in the field of philosophy may find

it necessary to read much material which does not seem relevant to his concerns in order to
get to what he really needs.

In order to see the relationship between the discipline of philosophy and the disciplined study of education, it may be well to catalogue some of the concerns in each of the areas of philosophy listed above. The basic concern of the metaphysician is for describing the nature of ultimate reality. Is there a supernatural dimension to the world? If so what is its relationship to the natural dimension? Are there natural laws, which are fixed and unchanging? What is the nature of change? Is it a principle feature of reality? Is anything changeless?

Epistemology deals with the nature of knowledge. Can one know his environment as it really is? How can one decide what is true? Is "truth" only relative? May a policy be theoretically good but not work in practice? Is learning a matter of cognition or of judgment? What is the role of intelligence?

Axiology is concerned with questions of value. What makes one thing more to be valued than another? Is value fixed or does it vary with the taste of the valuer? Can there be a hierarchy of value? Can or should a person's value system be changed? Are values in the last analysis dependent on what is useful or instrumental? Can values be determined scientifically?

Ethics is concerned with the nature of human relationships. What are the criteria which should guide our relationships with each other? Can a decision be reached apart from that of the society in which we operate? Are there special criteria, which govern the relationship of the parent and the child? The teacher and the child? The teacher and other professional personnel? The teacher and the community? What is the warrant for respecting human personality? May one generation fix the educational policies of the next? Are codes helpful in spelling out the relationships between various groups such as teacher and students or teachers and other professional? What is the solution to the ends and means problem?

Aesthetics is concerned with artistic values. What is an art? What are the differences between fine, industrial, and liberal arts? Are aesthetic values ends in themselves? Is the art experience of a person necessarily expressionistic? Should art work seek to approach the universal? Should art education serve a moral purpose? May the outcome of aesthetic expression be judged by others?

The study of politics deals with the whole range of problems in the relationship of the individual to the group. What is the desirable nature of the society? How will responsibility for leadership be delegated? How reasonable is the concept of social equality? How free can an individual be in a social setting? What are the reasonable limits on the powers of the state? What is the sphere of private action? How stable can a pluralistic society be? Can a welfare

state be democratic? What is the relationship which is appropriate between the government and other social groupings such as the family or the church? What is a proper balance between local and regional or national governmental power? What is a proper balance between nationalism and internationalism?

Logic is concerned less immediately with the kinds of questions enumerated above than with the validity of the process by which answers may be obtained. Is it the teacher's concern to teach students what to think or how to think? Should deductive or inductive logic be used as the basis for organizing instruction? Is the logical ordering of material the most effective approach to motivation and instruction?

It was suggested above that the contribution of systematic philosophies such as Idealism, Realism, Pragmatism, and Thomism to the study of the problems of education was that they had consistent solutions to many of the problems of the general type just enumerated and hence could provide a "head start" on some of the solutions of some of the more specific problems of the school.

It may be possible to illustrate this with a few examples. One of the oldest dichotomies in philosophical thinking is illustrated in the distinction between idealism and realism in their solutions to the basic problem in the area of metaphysics as to what is the nature of reality. For the idealist the basic real is in the realm of ideas; for the realist it is a realm of things. (Much of the so-called conflict between religion and science is more truly a conflict between idealists and realists.) As we move to the area of epistemology or the problem of knowledge, the idealist because he finds truth in ideas leans heavily on insights as the basis of knowledge. The realist mistrusts or even denies the validity of insight and leans more heavily on the results of experimentation. While the idealist and the realist are both able to recognize both inductive and deductive logic, the idealist prefers the deductive approach and the realist the inductive. On questions of value, the idealist again must depend on insight; the realist will attempt to find scientific or at least analytical process for judging or measuring value. In the realm of politics the idealist is likely to expect to find a just society based on conformity with some ultimate value system; the realist will expect to determine scientifically some acceptable set of guiding principles based primarily on the nature of man and his social needs.

Thomism represents an attempt to rationalize some of the conflicts between these two views by constructing a different solution to the metaphysical problems of the nature of reality. In the Thomistic view reality is essentially of two orders, a supernatural and a natural. The supernatural order is largely of the realm of idealism. The ultimate truth is to be found in the mind of God. The world of things was created by God and is hence subordinate to the

supernatural. Knowledge is of two orders: knowledge of the supernatural which is known largely by divine revelation and knowledge of the natural which can be known by the use of both deductive and inductive logic. Similarly there are two orders of value. One relates to man's divine nature, the other to his animal nature. Obviously his divine nature is of more importance. Politically the relationship of man to man or to his society is of less significance than his relationship to the Divine.

Pragmatism attempts to avoid some of the problems of the conflict between the idealist and the realist by starting not with a theory of nature of reality but rather with an analysis of the problems of knowledge or epistemology. Since knowledge is based only on the evidence available at a particular time it is of necessity partial and incomplete. Similarly value must be related to the context in which the valuing is being done. Truth then is defined in terms of relativity. In the realm of politics, the individual is viewed as the basic social unit and the principle of respect for individual personality becomes the basic principle in judging the value of social and political institutions.

It is not, however, intended that we delineate here all of the areas of educational philosophy or the schools of philosophy which might be appropriately considered. It is our intention instead to show that the problems of the field of education may be better understood and perhaps even moved toward solution by relating the problems of education to the areas of philosophical concern.

One of the primary problems in the field of education relates to the nature of the curriculum. What will be taught? This impinges on the questions in the realms of metaphysics, epistemology, axiology, aesthetics, ethics, and politics. If reality is as the idealist views it, the important things to be taught will be found within the realm of ideas and would relate to what we refer to in college circles as the humanities. On the other hand for the realist the sciences are of more significance with some attention to the content of the social sciences. For the Thomists the dual nature of reality presents a special concern. Whatever is taught must be taught in the context that there is recognition of the greater importance of the supernatural than of the natural. For the pragmatist the lack of an acceptable view of reality makes it important to avoid rigid commitments to subject matter and creates a commitment to tentativeness.

The theory of knowledge of each of our four basic positions perhaps makes even more clear the curriculum problem. For the idealist, knowledge is the product of insight and may be transmitted in the form of language from one generation to the next. The curriculum should consist of the accumulated wisdom of the race. For the realist knowledge is the product of

scientific inquiry. The only dependable knowledge is that arrived through an experimental process which may be duplicated. The curriculum which is most desirable will be organized to lead the student through the experiments of the past. Since the Thomist recognizes two orders of reality and two orders of knowledge, he assumes the existence of two types of curricula. One is designed to teach a revealed truth, the other to teach about the natural world. Since however the supernatural must be kept foremost, it would be helpful if both supernatural and natural truth were taught in the same classroom. For the pragmatist, the desirable curriculum is to be found in the day to day experiences of the child. It is difficult to arrive at a prescribed sequence of curriculum content of the sort that would prove quite acceptable to the idealist, realist, or Thomist.

The process of determining values will also make a difference in considering the nature of curriculum. For the idealist, the curriculum is more valuable which contributes to the development of the mind as a storehouse of knowledge. For the realist the curriculum should instead develop a facility for critical analysis. For the Thomist, the best curriculum will be that relating to the supernatural. For the pragmatist the curriculum is best which provides the greatest flexibility for the teacher and for the student. The fixed values of the idealist and Thomist create a relatively inflexible curriculum.

The view of politics tends to influence the curriculum approach very tremendously. The idealist and realist would tend to differentiate the curricula for different social levels within the society. For the pragmatist, social stratification is undesirable and the curriculum should encourage and permit as much social mobility as may be possible. Indoctrination for political purposes seems more likely to be acceptable to Thomist, Idealist, or Realist but not to Pragmatist.

A second important area of educational problems lies in the field of methodology. One of the important questions in the area is as to the role of the teacher in relation to that of the learner. For the idealist the teacher's role is quite important, he is to be the mediator between the tradition and the individual. As such he imparts information from the cultural heritage. For the realist, the teacher plays a similar role. Since, however, the nature of truth is more to be found in a demonstration of real relationships than in the exposition of the truth, he is more likely to demonstrate than to lecture. For the pragmatist, it is important that the student find for himself what is true. Hence the role of the teacher is as a guide or resource person than as a lecturer or demonstrator.

A third problem area is that of the relationship of the school to the society of which it is a part. For the idealist the school is essentially a transmitter of culture. It is hence merely a creature of the culture and of the society. If it is supported by the church, it must teach the message of

the church. If it is supported by the state, it must inculcate patriotism and loyalty. For the realist, the school is also the creature of the society and of the state. It has at least at its higher levels, a function additional to that of transmitting the inherited truth and that is in the discovery of the world as it really is. The specialist studying in a field in which he has achieved some competence must be permitted to continue independently of apparent conflict with traditional truth. For the pragmatist, the school is not primarily a transmitter of the culture but is instead the agent of the society in the modification of the culture. The primary allegiance of the pragmatically oriented teacher is not to the society as an entity but rather to the individual students whom he is teaching. For the Thomist, the school is not primarily the creature of the state but of the representative of the supernatural order—the church.

More specifically there may be a concern within the problems of the relationship of the school to the society in such an area as the teaching of controversial issues. While practically all philosophical positions current within our American setting may be rationalized to permit teaching about controversial issues in suitably contrived situations, there is still significant variation in the concern which they have for this problem. The idealist and the Thomist both seem quite concerned that where there seems to be a sounder position that instruction be suitably safeguarded against the possibility of permitting the student to come up with the “wrong” solution. The pragmatist and to a large extent the realist seem more permissive of free discussion with the assumption that where there is a sounder position it will eventually be recognized as such. The pragmatist is particularly insistent that each individual must be left free to come up with his own solution. The realist might delay some freedom until the student is beginning to become a specialist.

One other facet of the problem of the relationship of the school to the society has to do with the attitude of the school toward social progress. For the idealist, social progress sometimes is viewed as a sort of unfolding process through which the Divine plan becomes realized. The school may help the individual student realize the nature of this plan, it may help him to conserve existing social solutions. It has little or no responsibility for stimulating unrest. For the realist, the school is likely to be viewed as a social agency among many. It may, particularly at the college and university levels, study the nature of the society and could perhaps contribute to systematic modification of institutions. It would not however play any really significant role in stimulating change through its instructional programs at the elementary and secondary levels. For the Thomist, the school’s appropriate role is largely conservative. For the pragmatist, change is inevitable. Whether progress or regression will result will be largely dependent on the extent to which each individual is given the tools for participating in the

improvement of the society. The school is to stimulate dissatisfaction with the iniquities in the present order.

Another example of the way in which philosophy is related to educational practice may be seen in the way in which student management is handled either in the classroom or in the total school setting. For the idealist the teacher is a very important figure and personality in the classroom. He must be respected. The good classroom is considered to be an orderly classroom. Conversely orderliness is considered one of the primary indicators of goodness. For the realist the material to be learned is the important consideration. Classroom discipline must facilitate the orderly process of learning the material planned for the lesson of the day. For the Thomist, reverence for the teacher as the representative of the church becomes important. Any lack of attention or lack of respect of student for teacher is distasteful. For the pragmatist, the purpose of the classroom control is to permit the maximum amount of opportunity for the student to learn what he needs to learn. Among the things which he needs to learn are how to manage his own affairs, how to decide whether those in positions of authority are right, how to think divergently, and how to be tolerant of others. Orderliness is sometimes suspected as involving too much conformity and loss of individuality.

Where there is some attempt at student self government, the idealist is concerned primarily with teaching the forms of government but is unlikely to trust the student much. The realist is perhaps concerned with the extent of efficiency in the system in maintaining a reasonably orderly school. The pragmatist is concerned with the extent to which the experiences being provided are genuine. For him it matters little whether the process seems orderly but rather whether there was opportunity to gain additional social insight.

Perhaps the best illustration of the significance of systematic philosophy in education can be seen in recognition that each of the basic levels of our school system, the elementary, the secondary and the higher, seems to operate under distinctly different philosophical framework. This results in criticisms of each by those within the society oriented toward a different position and defense of each by those most sympathetically oriented.

The predominate philosophy of the elementary school within the twentieth century has been pragmatism. The self-contained classroom lends itself to the kind of flexibility necessary for those devoted to the proposition that each individual is appropriately different from each other. This is supported by the additional recognition that subject matter is a tool to be used which has little real significance in its own right. All of the children of the people are expected to be in attendance and teachers are expected to recognize the fact of differences both in background and need. It is the experience which can be provided for the child which is the

significant concern in planning for teaching, not a set amount of material organized for instruction.

The predominant philosophy of the secondary school since the middle of the nineteenth century and perhaps since the fifteenth, has been idealism. Ideas and subject matter, not children, are the basic focus of the organization of the secondary school. Marking systems are devised to rank students on absolute rather than on the relative standards of the typical elementary school. A standard certificate or diploma is the goal set for students and it is generally assumed to represent some clear standard of excellence. Counselors are provided and it is assumed by the public and many of the professionals that the role of the counselor is to help each student find his niche in the world. Ideas and concepts, not activities or experiences, represent the basic aims of instruction and determine the methods to be used. There is a clear hierarchy of courses within the program, the more intellectual being at the top of the scale and the more vocational at the bottom. Similarly the teachers of the more intellectual subjects carry more prestige than the vocational and physical education personnel. Awards and prizes are given to reinforce the known value system of the school. Those who cannot measure up to standards are eventually encouraged to quit.

The college and university seem dominated since the early part of the twentieth century by realism. Scientific method is the important consideration. No thought is considered safe which is not open to empirical demonstration. The stress in curriculum planning is on discovery of the fundamental structure of the disciplines being studied. Basic principles of the universe rather than concepts or ideas is stressed. There is disdain for "armchair speculation". The good teacher must first be a researcher—that is one who is willing and able to cast his ideas in the form of hypotheses and then to test them objectively. A research degree rather than teaching competence is the first consideration in the selection of a staff. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that it is assumed that the research degree is a satisfactory measure of teaching competence.

The attitude of different people toward the relative excellence of private and public education or of American and foreign systems of education also relates rather clearly to their philosophical orientation. The idealist and the Thomist are not likely to be concerned about the overtones of aristocracy in the existence of a private school system or in the actual practice of the European school. Hence they will on occasion be likely to suggest that such schools are of "higher standard" than the American public school. During the craze over Sputnik many of the realists assumed that the Russian achievement represented a superiority of Russian schools in teaching of science and suggested that perhaps American schools needed to emulate them. In

general the realist will be more concerned over how much content is being mastered by a few students than with the more general problem of how many of the total life problems of the total school population may be being provided for. The pragmatist, while frequently concerned with the quality of American public education, is concerned in the opposite direction from the idealists and realists. He is more likely to wonder whether the public schools have become sufficiently different from the more conservative schools in this country and Europe. It is probably safe to say that in our pluralistic society we cannot expect all of the students of education to agree on any of the solutions to the problems of education. It is even safe to say that they won't even agree very precisely on which are the problems of the society. All that can be hoped from a study of the philosophy of education is that the student of education is able to achieve a higher level of sophistication as to the nature of the problems and a higher degree of consistency in his solution of them.