

What Philosophy Can Do for Education

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We have to distinguish between transcendental senses of “philosophy” and “education” and empirical senses. In principle philosophy is uniquely important to education because the enterprise of education is bound up with concepts and values and because philosophy is concerned to clarify these (not to promote any ideology or substantive position). In practice, philosophers are being squeezed out of practical educational decision making; but, if they are prepared (like Socrates) to function as and where they can, they can still do much good.

Il faut faire une distinction entre les significations transcendentales de la “philosophie” et de l’“éducation” et leurs significations pratiques. En principe, la philosophie joue un rôle irremplaçable en éducation parce que la démarche éducative repose essentiellement sur des concepts et des valeurs et parce que la philosophie cherche à élucider ces concepts et ces valeurs (et non à promouvoir une idéologie ou une position donnée). Dans les faits, cependant, les philosophes se voient dépouiller de tout pouvoir de décision. Toutefois, s'ils sont prêts (comme Socrate) à jouer leur rôle chaque fois qu'ils le peuvent, leur contribution peut être encore très valable.

Titles of enterprises like *philosophy, education, science, social work*, and so on can be taken in two senses. First, they have what might be called a transcendental, theoretical, or strictly logical sense. Philosophy, we might boldly say, exists in its own right, irrespective of what particular people called philosophers may do; education has its own definition or constitution, whatever people may do in schools; science is the name of a possible approach to the physical world, whether or not particular individuals or societies prefer to use it in place of witchcraft and astrology. But there is also an institutional, empirical, sociological, or practical sense—a sense in which most people, perhaps regrettably, are usually inclined to take such terms. In this sense philosophy is what philosophers (at some specified point in space and time) actually do, education is taken to mean some specific ongoing educational system, and so on.

The difference between these two senses is enormous, and failure to distinguish between them is an important partial cause of failure in communication between philosophers—who are often concerned with the first, transcendental or logical, sense—and other educationalists, who are always concerned with what (as unconscious empiricists) they quaintly call “the real world,” the world of practical politics, the “ed biz,” and who are thus wedded

to the second, practical, sense. Having distinguished more fully elsewhere (Wilson, 1979) the senses of education, I shall say no more here about the distinction; but what follows is divided between considerations about what philosophy can in principle do for education, to which the brief answer is "A great deal—in fact, almost everything," and considerations about what actual philosophers can do in practice for education as now organized, to which the brief answer is "Quite a lot, if they pull their socks up."

PHILOSOPHY IN PRINCIPLE

There are good reasons for being brief here: one of them is that most of the relevant points have already been made in the literature (some of the central works are listed in the References). But the most important is that the chief point is really quite obvious—that even the most cursory account of the two enterprises of philosophy and education shows an enormous overlap between them. Indeed, some philosophers have gone even further—as Hare (1970) says of Plato, "it would not be much of an exaggeration to say that for him philosophy *was* the philosophy of education" (p. 15); conversely, it is not clear how much of any educational inquiry would be left to other disciplines, if philosophy had already been fully brought to bear on it (see Egan, 1983).

There is—if it is really necessary to rehearse the reasons—an inevitably large overlap because, on any serious account of philosophy, that enterprise consists at least of examining and trying to improve our understanding of our basic concepts and values and because on any serious account of education, that enterprise is inextricably bound up with concepts and values that are unclear, controversial, and hence very much in need of such examination. Discipline, learning, teaching, the curriculum, indoctrination, morality, politics, intelligence, the emotions, subject-titles (science, English, history, etc.), administration, counselling, pastoral care—there is hardly a single concept in the world of education which does not fall into this category. Nor is this surprising: for while there are some purely technical enterprises, such as making cars or selling insurance or building houses, where controversial concepts and values play only a small part, there are also many nontechnical enterprises that deal with human beings in a broader sense—marriage, social work, religion, politics, mental health. The proper conduct of these, as of education, demonstrably turns on our having a correct and adequate grasp of the concepts that lie at the root of them. It should not take a competent philosopher more than a few minutes to persuade a teacher, pupil, parent, or anyone concerned with education that almost any question one raises leads almost at once to philosophical inquiry—if, that is, the person is prepared to listen.

But that is a very big *if*. In a recently published book, by a curious coincidence entitled *What Philosophy Can Do*, I have tried to give an account

not only of philosophy but of the very wide variety of reasons that people have for misinterpreting it, dismissing it, or in some way or other resisting and avoiding it. Whatever its merits or demerits, I wrote the book (if the reader will forgive a piece of autobiography) because it seemed to me, at a purely intellectual level, quite clear not only *that* philosophy was essential to such enterprises as education but also *how*, at least in broad outline, philosophy was relevant. A great deal had been said by such writers as Hirst, Peters, Barrow, Scheffler, Warnock, Hare, myself, and many others on this topic—both about the general applications of philosophy to education and about its particular application to many educational topics. This literature was readily available to educators. But it was simply *not read*, and the main reasons seemed to me to be that there were very profound resistances to philosophy in general and a misunderstanding of what philosophy was and what it could do. So it seemed necessary to tackle these head-on.

This is not to deny that there may be genuine differences of opinion, even among philosophers, about the extent to which or the ways in which philosophy can help education. I myself (Wilson, 1979 and elsewhere) take a fairly extreme view: briefly, I believe that human beings are landed with certain concepts and values, whether they like it or not, and that among these inexpellable concepts and values are most of those which figure in the enterprise of education. Consequently, I believe that most of education would go right if these concepts and values were thoroughly understood and that most of it goes wrong just because they are not; and I take this to be more important than other difficulties, such as lack of money, or lack of willpower, or ignorance of empirical facts. Not all philosophers would share this view; but they would all, I believe, share the more modest view of philosophy as at least necessary to prevent confusion, inconsistency, irrationality, and that sort of fanaticism which comes from neglecting certain conceptual points. That is enough to be going on with.

Several eminent philosophers have suggested to me, in conversation, that philosophy is essentially a particular form of communication; and certainly it is true that the proper place of philosophy in education will not become apparent to educators (perhaps not to philosophers either) unless there is adequate communication in the first place. Thus, on the view described above, there is an implication (which I firmly accept) that philosophers ought not just to participate in educational theory and practice but in some sense to lead or control it—to stand, as surely philosophy must stand if it is to stand anywhere, above and behind the other contributing disciplines and inputs to educational practice. But it is no good just *saying* this: let a philosopher take part in some educational project, alongside psychologists and sociologists, teachers and parents, in a context sufficiently spacious for full discussion of methodology, to take place.

It would become clear, for instance, that we must first get a proper conceptual grasp of what, say, discipline, science, morality, or pastoral care actually is; following from that, we could find out what empirical work (if any) needed to be done and hence what practical moves needed to be made. Here, philosophy certainly has logical priority (we cannot do serious research on discipline unless and until we are clear about what discipline is) and may even need to control the whole operation. Again, it would become clear that curricular practice should turn largely on what things were really worth learning—a question that leads immediately to a philosophical discussion of the human condition. Or again, still more obviously, we cannot do any worthwhile work in moral or religious education without a proper understanding of what morality and religion are and what it means to be educated in them—after which there may in fact be comparatively little work for empirical scholars to do, since the only thing then required might be common sense. But all these points, whatever the truth turns out to be, will only emerge effectively in the course of discussion.

The same is true, in my experience, if one wants the nature of philosophy to emerge effectively. Though still optimistic enough to believe that the printed word may cut some ice, I am increasingly inclined to think that (for many or most people, anyway) the nature and powers of philosophy will only become clear in close and extended discussion—in effect, in some form of personal relationship. Plato, I think, took the same view. This suggests the importance of the context of the Socratic dialogue as opposed to the somewhat bleaker contexts which we are used to in universities today.

I can of course *say* that philosophy is concerned with the analysis of concepts, that it is not ideological, and that it is concerned with meaning and consistency and with how words are used, and so on and so forth, *but* all this has been very clearly said already, more than once, *and* it cuts little ice with people who are not already predisposed to the subject. One of the most striking illustrations of this is the persistence of the belief that there is, or was, something called *linguistic philosophy* (*analytic philosophy*, or *Oxford philosophy*), which was a particular school of philosophy with particular assumptions and even a particular ideology, when in fact the whole thrust of J. L. Austin's work (to name but one philosopher) was to eschew all such notions and simply try to get clear about what was said—quite enough to be going on with, but (it appears) unbelievable to those who have psychological reasons for insisting that philosophy must be an ideological or substantive, not a purely procedural, business (Wilson, 1986).

This is again unsurprising because to accept the importance of philosophy as a procedural business involves giving more ground than most people are prepared to give. If philosophy were only partly relevant to education, or could be hived off from it or were only relevant at certain levels (in teacher-education institutions, say, but not in government or in the schools), the

alarm would be less—rather as if one believed that the business of mental health was only relevant to a few well-identified lunatics. But, of course, philosophy, like the disciplines of mental health, is relevant throughout: at the government level, local authority level, school board level, school level, parental level, and in all institutions that study education and educate teachers. That is, obviously enough, because conceptual confusion can crop in all these places, just as lack of insight and mental illness can crop up. Give Socrates a university professorship and no one will complain; allow him to roam the streets asking nasty questions and the authorities will prepare themselves to commit judicial murder.

Headings like “The Relevance of Philosophy to Educational Research” are (in the light of these points) apt to be profoundly misleading, for they suggest what is true only at the institutional or practical level—that there is an *independent* activity called *educational research* (itself essentially empirical, and conducted by psychologists and sociologists) to which philosophy may or may not be relevant. That is a mistake. First, educational research must for reasons already given *include* philosophy: the concepts and values of almost any topic for such research will require philosophical examination. Second, it is no good thinking that we can do a bit of philosophy to begin with—get clear about the concepts or define our terms properly—and then forget about it: conceptual problems *run through* all such research. But third, and perhaps somewhat more important, it is difficult if not impossible to draw any hard-and-fast line between research and the kind of open-minded criticism and inquiry that all educators must take on board so long as they are educating; and philosophy is an essential tool of such inquiry.

In other words, educators (indeed, anyone concerned with general, person-oriented enterprises) must exercise philosophical competence throughout their activities. They must be able, as it were, to put on philosophical spectacles when looking at what they are doing. No doubt there are other spectacles (particularly, perhaps, those worn by competent psychotherapists) that they should also be able to put on. My own experience in working closely (indeed, in the same residence) with a psychologist and a sociologist made it clear that even the idea of interdisciplinary inquiry could mislead. It was necessary that all three of us should be able to wield the tools of the three disciplines. Something like this, I am sure, is required as a basis for training educators in the future.

I do not think it possible, in advance of the existence of people trained in this way who actually engage in educational inquiry, to predict just how much philosophy or psychology or sociology (or any other discipline) will be seen to be relevant to particular educational topics. My guess is that most of the work will be philosophical, and most of the rest common sense; but that may be a partisan view, and I do not want to deny at least the logical possibility of important counter-intuitive (that is, non-obvious) findings

that bear directly upon educational practice, and that are strictly empirical. Not all important truths about human beings are conceptual truths, even though many are (and are dressed up as empirical by psychologists and sociologists). But we have to wait and see: to date we have no serious educational inquiry that is based on a properly-trained team of enquirers.

PHILOSOPHY IN PRACTICE

What philosophers can do in practice is not a philosophical matter, or not wholly so. Unfortunately those empirical workers who might help us here—sociologists, political theorists, psychologists, and psychiatrists—do not seem to have much grasp of what philosophy (in principle) is and can do for education, so that philosophers must take it on themselves to say (and do) something. I myself would claim that the most important discipline here is psychiatry, not because there are not important institutional, political, and in general large-scale obstacles that need to be understood and overcome but because this is unlikely to happen if the psychological resistances are not overcome. To change society, we must first educate individuals, including ourselves. In any case, apart from a more detailed analysis undertaken elsewhere (Wilson, 1986), I can only offer a number of ad hoc, practical suggestions without the benefit of a theoretical background (and there is in my judgment no such background, no well-established theory of change that can help us at present).

It is very important here not to underestimate the opposition. Over the last 10 or 20 years many institutions (certainly in the U.K., and there are parallels in North America and elsewhere) have changed dramatically. Where once courses in the philosophy of education were standard practice, it is now entirely possible for students in both initial and inservice training to pass through an institution without bumping into philosophy at all, and there is little evidence to suggest that one's nonphilosophical colleagues have bumped into it either. Books and articles are not read, lectures and seminars not given: philosophy plays little or no part in research, and philosophers are not popular appointments for administrative or other influential positions. Needless to say, they are given no money for research. Of course there are exceptions, and though this is not the place to distribute praise or blame to individual educationalists or individual institutions, it is encouraging that the Department of Education at Cambridge University (Cambridge, England, not Cambridge, Massachusetts) is under the control of a capable philosopher. But the rest is gathering—indeed, gathered—gloom, in which the owl of Minerva, far from taking flight in Hegel's sense, has either taken flight in another sense or been shot down.

Those of us who survive can, of course, engage in activities of the kind recommended by Barrow (1982), with whose suggestions I entirely agree,

by myself (Wilson, 1983), or by others. One can press for some program of staff development in that one's colleagues are given a better chance to grasp what philosophy can do; one can attempt to get money for research even from unsympathetic funding bodies, one can join in all the activities of an institution with the hope that one may be able to introduce some philosophy on the side, as it were; above all, one can try to remain robust, polite, helpful, and enthusiastic even under pressure. This is, in effect, to see philosophy of education as some kind of informal missionary activity that may to some extent flourish in the interstices of the official institutional programs, or as a minority activity that may attract the attention of some students, rather than as something still effectively institutionalized. That is, after all, the actual position; and I suppose that if Socrates could tolerate it, so should we. In the present climate, it would be unrealistic to hope for more.

Plato thought it worthwhile to present the outlines of a state in that philosophy played a full and justifiable part, even in a climate that gave no hope of such a state actually coming about; and perhaps it is worthwhile to make sketches of what educational institutions would look like if philosophy contributed to them as it ought to. But here again, this has been done by several people: my own attempts in relation to educational research (Wilson, 1972) and teacher education (1975) have not, unsurprisingly, been put into practice, and I doubt whether other writers have had better luck. After all, it is fewer than twenty years since Richard Peters' Herculean efforts created the impression—perhaps one should say the illusion—that philosophy of education was here to stay as a discipline widely taught in educational institutions and respected at the highest administrative levels; yet most of that has melted like the winter snow, leaving isolated pockets of philosophical activity that are shrinking all the time and forcing philosophers to sell their wares under more fashionable headings (*curriculum* is one).

We need here to avoid despair: just as some think that the Church of England would be better placed if it were disestablished, it is possible to believe that philosophy of education ought to be a purely missionary, informal activity. It is certainly hard to institutionalize under any conditions, and there is certainly scope enough, provided one's talents as an informal communicator are adequate, to spread philosophical light without the backing of institutional structures or financial support. Perhaps one should not knock one's head against the institutional brick wall but devote one's energies to ad hoc conversations with individuals, occasional squibs in the popular educational press, voluntary extra-curricular groups meeting after hours, and so forth. These are certainly not to be sneezed at, but more is surely to be hoped for.

Hence I must in all honesty advance the only suggestion likely (as I see it) to be effective in the long term. For I do not believe that the difficulties that

philosophers face in respect of existing institutions are likely to diminish. On the contrary, I think they will increase. It is not too dramatically eschatological to believe that we are living at a time when respect for intellectual authority—particularly the kind of transcendental authority to that philosophers should lay claim—is low and getting lower. All institutions (and I do not exclude institutions that are still comparatively respectable, such as the University of Oxford) are under egalitarian and relativist pressures, which may be expected to increase. The absence of respect for rational authority and the fading of any serious intellectual tradition has already produced a vacuum into which rush, predictably, the forces of politics, public relations, democratic and popular appeal, topicality and fashion, consumerism, and philistinism. It is already plain that most institutions of education are dedicated to anti-intellectual values: philosophy of education has simply been the first to be victimized.

There is nothing particularly new about this: most of the phenomena are well described by Plato (see particularly *Republic*, Book 9). Plato must have known that his attempts to influence events, whether at Syracuse or Athens, were the longest of long shots and that his founding of the Academy was a better bet. Modern philosophers too, if they are serious, will want to create new institutions uncorrupted by contemporary vices, a requirement which means that they must be financially and politically independent. This, in turn, involves raising enough money to produce a number of institutions owned, controlled, and organized by philosophers, which have some hope of weathering a storm that will certainly last a long time. There is a parallel here—again, in my judgment, not too dramatic—with the founding of monasteries and other independent institutions toward the end of the Roman Empire.

I am not pessimistic about the possibility of doing this, if only philosophers will take it seriously. There are not a few good-willed people, many of them either individually rich or able to attract money, who would regard my very brief and inadequate sketch of contemporary barbarism and future cultural chaos as not entirely wide of the mark: a whole-hearted attempt to raise funds for this purpose would not fail. I am, however, somewhat more pessimistic about philosophers themselves. Most eminent philosophers, in comfortable high-status jobs that do not include the task of applying philosophy to practical enterprises, are likely to lack the motivation; those of us who have to work in the teeth of the difficulties described above may despair. In both cases, there will be the temptation, as Plato puts it, to keep one's head down, cowering in the lee of some convenient wall out of the way of the storm. We can, after all, still write (perhaps even publish) our books, some people may read them, our consciences may be kept clear by our diligence, and nobody (yet) forces us to drink hemlock. Perhaps we

are taking the whole thing too seriously. But, on the other hand, perhaps not, and we ought to do all that we can. It would be yielding to a curious kind of puritanical compulsion to suppose that, just because we are philosophers, it is not also our job to engage in the political and public relations necessary for philosophy to survive in a proper state. I have simply tried to suggest that this task requires more direct and radical action than we tend to suppose.

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Wir müssen zwischen den transzendentalen Bedeutungen der "Philosophie" und der "Erziehungswissenschaften" und den empirischen Bedeutungen unterscheiden. Im Prinzip ist die Philosophie einzigartig wichtig für die Erziehungswissenschaften, zum einen, weil die erzieherische Aufgabe im wesentlichen verknüpft ist mit Konzepten und Werten, und zum anderen, weil die Philosophie bestrebt ist, diese zu klären (und *nicht* irgendeiner Ideologie oder Position Vorschub zu leisten). In der Praxis werden Philosophen aus praktischen erziehungswissenschaftlichen Entscheidungsprozessen herausgedrängt: wenn sie jedoch (wie Sokrates) darauf eingestellt sind, tätig zu sein, wie und wo sie es vermögen, können sie immer noch viel Gutes erreichen.

Debemos distinguir entre los sentidos trascendentales de "filosofía es de importancia única a la educación porque la empresa educativa está esencialmente ligada a conceptos y valores, y porque el interés de la filosofía es aclararlos (y *no* de fomentar una ideología o posición substantiva). En la práctica, los filósofos se ven dejados de lado en cuanto a la toma de decisiones prácticas en educación; pero si están listos (como Sócrates) a funcionar cuando y donde puedan, pueden aún hacer mucho bien.

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