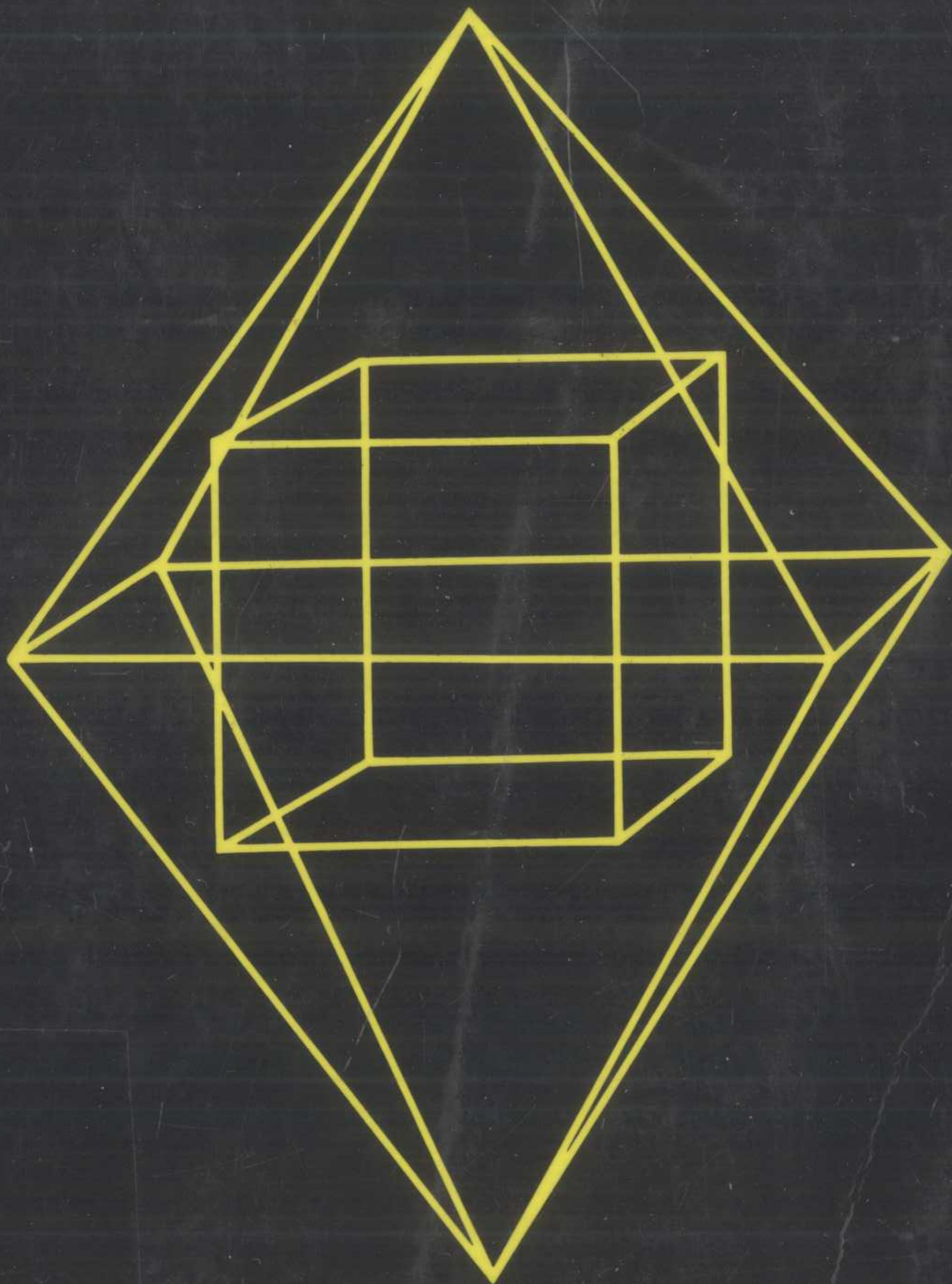


# **An Introduction to PHILOSOPHY of EDUCATION**

**Third Edition**



**Robin Barrow Ronald Woods**



# **An Introduction to Philosophy of Education**

Third Edition

Robin Barrow & Ronald Woods



London and New York

For Anne . . .

Just Because

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## Preface to Second Edition (1982)

The invitation from our publishers to update and revise our *Introduction to Philosophy of Education* gives rise to the question of the nature of philosophy, for it is not the kind of subject that dates in the way that physics or even history may do. There are revolutionary thinkers in philosophy who open up entirely new paths of inquiry, but they are exceedingly rare, and even they do not often falsify the past so much as move away from it. Philosophy is less about generating knowledge of new matters than about providing greater understanding of what we are already familiar with. Seldom are there new discoveries or new interpretations that make previous work in the field unacceptable. What, for example, Plato had to say about love or justice over two thousand years ago has not been invalidated, replaced, or rendered obsolete by the work, of, say, Wittgenstein in this century. Plato's writings really do have as much pertinence today to the questions with which they are concerned as any contemporary work, in a way that the writings of early Greek doctors or scientists, for all their intrinsic interest, do not. There can of course be specific criticism in philosophy that shows arguments thought to have been sound to be untenable, but that kind of shift of view scarcely applies at the level of an introductory text.

Our initial aim was to provide an introduction to the business of philosophizing in the context of educational problems; in line with that aim we concentrated on pursuing an examination of the main concepts in the domain of education (or, as I should now prefer to say, schooling, since I take education to be merely one of many possible concerns of school, although most of the topics treated here are to do with the more specific concept of education). The intention was to conduct a rigorous investigation of the ideas of education, knowledge, culture, etc., so that a fuller picture of them and a greater awareness of the implications of



## *Preface to Second Edition (1982)*

each concept would emerge, or sometimes, so that the inadequacy of an idea or slogan might be exposed. In so far as what we originally wrote was to the point and coherent, the passing of time – at any rate, so brief a period of time – does not much affect it. If there was the logical possibility of distinguishing between influence generally and indoctrination specifically five years ago, there will be still. If our conception of education involved knowledge and understanding then, it does now in all probability. If the creativity of a Beethoven was distinct from the self-expression of a young child last year, there will be good reason to maintain that distinction this year. So, in design and broad outline this edition retains the format and flavour of the first, not because we are complacent, but because material changes in the world do not often affect conceptual truths and points of logic.

None the less some changes have been made. First, there are a number of small but not insignificant stylistic alterations; and a number of grammatical infelicities have been corrected. Allusions and references have in many places been brought up to date: nothing dates quite as obviously as the name of a defunct pop group or a forgotten political event. Examples, too, have sometimes been brought up to date, although here again it must be remembered that the function of examples in philosophy is very often such that neither their being up to date nor their practical likelihood matters very much. For instance, when a philosopher considers whether a historian who knows nothing other than history should be considered as educated, he is not interested in the likelihood of there actually being such a person, but in whether, *if* there was, he would count as educated. He is interested in what might intelligibly be conceived, more than in what happens to be the case in the physical world. It is important to realize at the outset that examples are used for the purpose of testing logical possibilities rather than actual probabilities in order to avoid the mistake of assuming that philosophers are out of touch with the everyday world. When we ask whether a person could be in two places at the same time, we are not questioning the possibility of a physical body such as yours or mine being entirely in Oxford while also being entirely in Cambridge; rather we are raising the question of the senses in which a person might conceivably be said to be in two places at the same time. (Suppose your body minus your heart is in Oxford, but your heart is keeping another body alive in Cambridge.) In other words we are really raising the question of what constitutes being a person, and not asking about material factors in the everyday world at all. When we ask whether an individual could be considered creative if he



were to spill paint accidentally onto canvas in such a way as to produce a beautiful pattern, we are not concerned with whether anyone has done or might do such a thing, but with throwing light on what is involved in the notion of being creative. (Again, if someone did that, would we classify it as a creative act?) Likewise, nobody that I know of would behave in some of the ways used as examples in the chapter on rationality in this book, but to consider examples, however bizarre, allows us to fill in the details of, or to question, our conceptions. (Incidentally, one reference that I have not bothered to update is that made to the launching of the first Sputniks. It is true that some readers may not have heard of Sputniks, but in terms of technological breakthrough, which is the point of the reference, some of the early steps in the space race represent more significant achievements than later, more dramatic steps. For that reason the example does not need bringing up to date, and for that reason younger readers ought to be presented with it.)

Once or twice changes in our own thinking brought about by thought and discussion and with the passing of time have necessitated alterations to the substance of an argument. Or issues to which we were not previously alert, such as the widespread immoral treatment of animals, have impinged on our consciences and required a mention. However, such changes in substantive content are not extensive, if only because, while the original text was the work of two of us, this revision has been solely my responsibility.

The main weakness of the original edition, in my view, was that we did not draw a very clear distinction between words and concepts or between verbal and conceptual analysis. More simply, we did not, perhaps, make it entirely clear what we took philosophical analysis to involve. In particular, we made a number of references to 'linguistic usage' and to 'objectivity' and 'correctness', without making it clear to what extent linguistic usage *determines* conceptual meaning (as opposed to reflects it, coincides with it, influences it, etc.), and without explaining in what senses of the words an analysis can be said to be 'objective' and/or 'correct'. On this broad but vitally important matter of methodology Woods and I have, we think, slightly different views although we have never satisfactorily resolved wherein the difference lies. This may partially explain the slight vagueness, not to say odd sign of tension, about our procedure in the previous edition.

I have argued extensively elsewhere that although there are a number of very important questions to be asked about verbal



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matters (the features and functions of words and our use of them), it is important to distinguish them from conceptual questions.<sup>1</sup> Questions about linguistic usage may lead to illuminating answers of direct relevance to conceptual issues, and should therefore be asked by philosophers. But none the less they are distinct from questions about concepts as such, and should therefore not be the philosopher's only interest. As words and concepts are not identical, so linguistic analysis cannot be co-extensive with conceptual analysis. We may ask how people tend to use the word 'educated' and that will certainly throw light upon what is generally involved in being educated, at any rate as conceived by our culture. We may find that all people use the term in exactly the same way, or we may find that, despite variations, there is a common core to all uses of the word. Consequently we might, if we chose, talk of a correct or objective sense of the word 'educated' (i.e. the sense of the word sanctioned by usage in our culture). But such linguistic exercises, though they may in some cases incidentally reveal all that there is to be said about the concept behind the word (the idea behind the label), do not necessarily do so, and in fact are less likely to do so in proportion to the complexity and sophistication of the idea in question. Two problems, at least, may very likely remain – problems that need tackling and which very obviously belong to the domain of philosophy: people may use a word in widely different ways, sometimes to the point at which there does not appear to be even a common core, and people's use of a term may fail to reveal a clear and coherent conception on its own terms. Thus 'educated' might conceivably mean something quite different for two people (in which case we are dealing with distinct concepts labelled with the same word), and anybody's notion of being educated, including one's own, might just be insufficiently clarified and worked out. I should be strongly inclined to conclude that talk of a correct or objective concept is therefore meaningless, unless one merely means a widely shared concept. One may reasonably ask whether my use of the word 'educated' is correct according to standard practice in my culture, but the question to ask about my concept of being educated is how well formulated or articulated it is.

The task of the philosopher, having taken what hints and clues he can from linguistic patterns, is to arrive at a set of clear, coherent and specific concepts. We need to clarify our concepts in order to assess them; until we painstakingly spell out what we understand by being educated we can say nothing about it, and obviously our unpacking must lead to a clear exposition, so we know that we are saying something and what it is. Coherence is



necessary, both within and between concepts, so that our ideas make sense and can stand up: we do not want a conception of being educated that when clearly articulated turns out to be self-contradictory or to carry with it implications that we cannot for one reason or another accept. Specificity is necessary in order to facilitate talk with teeth in it. That is to say, in order to be able to make telling comments on the world, in order to gain a fuller understanding, one needs to develop an armoury of specific as opposed to general concepts. The ability to discriminate between the various species of a genus, in any field, rather than to see the world only in terms of genera, represents power when it comes to knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

In line with the distinction referred to between words and concepts, the device of using quotation marks round single words or phrases, rather overworked in the first edition and not adopted consistently, has here been systematized. When the word is being referred to, quotation marks are used; when the concept is being referred to, they are not used. Thus we discuss the logical features of knowledge, but the emotive force of the word 'knowledge'. Occasionally quotation marks are also used as 'sneer quotes' to suggest an ironic or otherwise not quite literal use of a word or phrase.

Another change I considered was that of replacing the generic use of the word 'he' (to mean 'a person') by 'she' or by some newly coined neutral term. But I rejected this in the end on the grounds that correct English provides us with the word 'he' meaning 'a person of either sex', and it would be more appropriate for the few who do not appreciate this to learn it, than for the rest of us to devise new terminology. To replace 'he' by 'she', as some authors now do, seems the worst of all worlds and a good example of the incoherence of what is sometimes termed 'reverse discrimination'. If 'he' were an immoral or otherwise unacceptable usage, then so must the use of 'she' be immoral, as well as incorrect.<sup>3</sup>

One or two additional comments, sometimes substantive, have been made, but economic factors have necessitated that most of them be added as notes at the end of the chapter in question.

But what, the novice may ask, about the effect of recent currents of thought and shifts of ideology and perspective? Marxism, for instance, has made great inroads in the philosophy of education in Australia since this book was first written. In Britain in the same period interest in phenomenology and existentialism has increased. In the study of education a number of sociological critiques have tried to suggest that the type of philos-



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ophy here practised is just one more class-based act of special pleading. Should not these and other similar tides of thought be reflected in some way in a new edition? The simple answer is, no. The various movements, ideologies, and methodological critiques that come and go are attempts to interpret the world in one particular way. They are therefore to be contrasted with, rather than opposed to, a book such as this which does not seek to explain the whole field of education, let alone the world or human experience, but to contribute to a greater understanding of some ideas and arguments related to education.<sup>4</sup>

Of course some work in other fields does suggest criticism of our methodology. Some, for instance, have argued, though quite unconvincingly, that knowledge is a *purely* social construct, and that our attempt to be detached and objective is necessarily but one more socially determined pose. Others, more reasonably, have made points to the effect that our procedure is in various ways less value neutral than we might wish. These latter kinds of criticism, involving argument directly related to certain practices or assumptions, are fair comment and, in so far as they are convincingly argued, to be taken note of. But a general sociological thesis, presented without reference to the arguments of particular philosophers, to the effect that the would-be autonomous and independent-minded philosopher is actually inevitably the product of his social environment, no more requires a philosophical rejoinder or the abandonment of philosophical practice, than a Freudian account of why an individual seeks love in the ways he does obliges the lover to start loving in a new way. It is, incidentally, most unfortunate that, given this quite common tendency to fail to see the difference between sociological attempts to explain, psychological types of explanation, philosophical inquiry, and historical accounts of events, and the consequent tendency to believe any one of them to be more significant than it is, we have for the most part failed to institutionalize the study of at least these four subjects as crucial to the study of education. Had we done so with more success there might be fewer people around who believe that to explain why somebody believes something in sociological terms, is to dispense with the question of whether the belief is reasonable. (At the University of Leicester, while preaching the importance of the disciplines, we have in fact moved from requiring students to study all four ten years ago, through a period of requiring that they study only one, to a state in which they study two. This is to be welcomed, I suppose, on the grounds that half a loaf is better than none. But the adage is misleading. When the point of the exercise is to develop in people



a capacity to recognize logically different aspects of a matter, giving people awareness of only half the possibilities is more like giving them half a sixpence than half a loaf.)

It was, then, never the purpose of philosophy (our conception of it, that is) or a book such as this to offer to interpret the world. Its aim was, and remains, 'to attempt to show philosophy in action' with 'the stress on how to do philosophy'. For this reason it is of secondary importance what particular concepts and arguments are focused upon. We might have elected to add chapters on topical themes, but to have done so would only have been to reduplicate work done elsewhere. As to the original issues we chose to discuss, it is difficult to see how a philosopher of education could not but throw out at least passing reference to education, understanding, and knowledge, and we still believe that rationality, culture, creativity, indoctrination, and the notions of readiness, discovery, needs, and wants (collected together in Chapter 8), deserve to be carefully considered by any prospective teacher.

Robin Barrow  
University of Leicester  
1982

## Notes

- 1 See in particular my *The Philosophy of Schooling* and 'Five Commandments for the Eighties' in *Educational Analysis*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1982, ed. Barrow, R.
- 2 See Barrow, R., *Injustice, Inequality and Ethics* (Brighton, Wheatsheaf, 1982) ch. 1.
- 3 On this topic, see further Barrow, R., op. cit. [For the third edition I have left this paragraph and left the generic 'he' in the body of the text. I recognize, however, that, rightly or wrongly, I am likely to lose this argument in practice, in the long run.]
- 4 [But note, since these words were first written, a recent review of the author's *Critical Dictionary of Educational Concepts*, which refers to an 'individualistic lack of interest in the social dimension'. *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 29 May 1987.]



# Preface to Third Edition

In the Preface to the second edition of this book I wrote 'At the University of Leicester, while preaching the importance of the [foundation] disciplines, we have in fact moved from requiring students to study all four [philosophy, psychology, history, and sociology] . . . , through a period of requiring that they study only one, to a state in which they study two.' Time passes, and now Leicester, in common with many other departments of education, requires nothing in the way of disciplined academic study. Indeed, both Ron Woods and myself, in common with other theoretically inclined educationalists, have now left the University of Leicester, nor is it likely that we will be replaced.

That, as some readers may appreciate, is about par for the course. It is particularly gratifying, therefore, to be invited to produce a third edition of this *Introduction to Philosophy of Education*, at a time when philosophy departments in universities are being closed down and education departments are all too often turning their backs on anything except 'hands on' courses dictated by government (to what good purpose we have yet to be told). The fact is not only that having some adequate grasp of philosophy is essential for making sense of daily educational activity, and sorting out the coherent from the absurd, but also that, *mirabile dictu*, there is a market for it!

Mention of the previous Preface brings me on to the point that Woods, who is now happily cultivating his garden both literally and metaphorically, and who for that reason left the preparation of this edition to me, has none the less voiced an opinion on that Preface. He thinks that it should be omitted from this edition. 'I cannot think', he writes, 'that a rarefied dispute about philosophic techniques is of interest to anyone except people like you and me – and we are rare!' He is referring to the comments made there about the distinction between words and concepts, and he may



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well have a point, at least so far as the manner of drawing attention to that issue goes. None the less, I have retained the Preface, including the passage in question, though with a few modifications and omissions. This is because, in my judgement, the question of what philosophical analysis is – what one is trying to analyse, why and how – is supremely important. It is obviously important theoretically since an understanding of what one is about must have some effect on the doing of it. But it is also important in practical terms, since lack of competent philosophizing in educational contexts is due partly to ignorance of what is involved.

In particular, many, if not most, people still seem to equate analysing a concept with defining a word in the sense of attempting to provide some verbally synonymous phrase for the word in question. The Preface to the second edition draws attention to the view that (i) philosophical analysis is ultimately concerned with the clear and coherent articulation of ideas rather than with definitions of words (although the latter may have a part to play in contributing to the former), and (ii), consequently, so-called ordinary language philosophy and linguistic analysis can be at best only part of the business of philosophy. To illustrate this as succinctly as possible: while our style of philosophy here is indeed closely associated with the clear use of everyday language, the book is not concerned simply with attempting to tabulate how people generally use such words as 'education', 'creativity', and 'culture'. Rather it is concerned with trying to explicate and unfold ideas or concepts such as those of education, creativity, and culture.<sup>1</sup> The object is to explore and iron out obscurities, contradictions, confusions, absurdities, and so forth that may be involved in particular people's hazy grasp of the ideas in question, rather than to say how various words either should be or are used.

What Ron Woods will feel about this tenacity on my part, I do not know. But I do wish to take this opportunity to record my affection and admiration for him. He is, *au fond*, a very private man, but he was a fine colleague and I miss him a great deal professionally.

In this edition I have made minor revisions throughout and updated the Bibliography (which incidentally was previously inaccurately and absurdly called 'a comprehensive bibliography of worthwhile writing in the field' – it was not comprehensive, nor is it now; furthermore, some indubitably worthwhile writing was not mentioned, and some of what was mentioned was not obviously worthwhile). But the major change is to be found in the addition of two completely new chapters (chapters 3 and 11 on 'Curriculum Theory' and 'Research into Teaching' respectively).



These chapters are not in quite the same mould as the rest of the book. The original chapters are all concerned with the analysis or elucidation of a concept (or concepts), with the aim, as was stated in the introduction, 'to attempt to show philosophy in action' with 'the stress on how to do philosophy'. While the new chapters do add a little to the general discussion of conceptual analysis (including some quite important points referred to but not illustrated in the Preface to the second edition), they are more concerned with claims about the confusion and logical incoherence of much of the current practice in the domains of curriculum and empirical educational research.

Curriculum is a branch of educational study that has come into its own more or less as institutional interest in philosophy has declined. This seems to be very sad. (And I suspect the change in their official fortunes is connected. Work in curriculum very often looks like a combination of bad philosophy and bad science, but it's very much easier to pass oneself off as a curriculum expert than a competent philosopher.) If curriculum is a relatively flourishing area, empirical research is rapidly becoming a *sine qua non* of respectability. Lecturers and professors are increasingly evaluated by reference to the amount of grant money they bring into a department (even if it is quite literally wasted) rather than by reference to an estimate of the wisdom they purvey. Yet, as I shall argue, a great deal of empirical research in education is misconceived, inappropriate, and quite simply irrelevant to advancing our understanding of the educational enterprise and thereby contributing to good practice.

I hope that the new chapters do not upset the pattern and the flow of the book as a whole too much. But it seems to me that philosophers should be applying themselves more than they sometimes have in the past to the practices and assumptions of those around them, that it is important in an introductory text to draw attention to the huge practical value of philosophy (as pinpointing, and hence allowing one to avoid, gross folly of one sort or another), and that their addition should therefore improve the utility of the book in respect of courses in education departments.

I toyed with the idea of cutting out some of the original chapters, as I did when preparing the second edition, but again felt disinclined to do so. Some of the words that form the chapter headings may be less in vogue than they once were, but the concepts and the issues surrounding them are quite certainly still around. For example, people do not actually say 'I believe in child-centred education' in the dewy-eyed way they did in the innocent 1960s and early 1970s. None the less, and whatever



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words they use, plenty of people do still emphasize the importance of children's needs, interests, and readiness and other features that once were referred to as the tenets of child-centred education; and furthermore they act in the light of their beliefs about such things. Consequently, it is as important as ever to get individuals to think more closely and carefully about these concepts and others that are discussed in chapter 8, but it is no longer entitled 'Child-Centred Education'. Similarly, 'creativity' may not be on educators' lips to the extent that it was when the book first appeared, but creativity tests are still an integral part of such things as empirical research into teaching quality, and a very large number of teachers, particularly at the primary or elementary school level, still proceed to put an inordinate amount of time and effort into what are hazily thought to be creative activities.

Of course, the fact that educationalists in general are still concerned with certain concepts does not necessarily mean that philosophers are. A case in point is provided by indoctrination. With the exception of my good friend Tasos Kazepides, philosophers have more or less stopped writing on the concept, because so much was written (a lot of it very good stuff) in the 1960s. But the issue of indoctrination is obviously still very much with us – one thinks of the upsurge of fundamentalism and creationist legislation in America, the recent trial of a teacher in Canada who maintains that the holocaust did not exist, and some of the 'educational' aspirations of the Department of Education and Science in Britain<sup>2</sup> – and in a textbook such as this it is therefore right and proper to study the concept.

There are certainly some omissions that might ideally be rectified. For example, there is no chapter on intelligence, which, quite apart from the fact that IQ tests are still with us and that the vogue word 'giftedness' at times seems a mere synonym for it, is surely one of the basic or key concepts of the educational enterprise. I decided against adding something on this particular topic, because I think that ideally it requires a fuller, book-length, treatment. (Within the limits of a chapter, a useful analysis is provided by John Kleinig in his *Philosophical Issues in Education*.) But more generally, having flipped through my own recent *Critical Dictionary of Educational Concepts*<sup>3</sup> for possible ideas, I decided against any attempt to cover the ground more thoroughly than we did initially. Philosophy is not about jumping on each passing wagon. The educational philosopher's task is to select the seemingly central or key concepts, those that help to constitute and organize his field, and stick with them.

In short, I am back with the contention that whatever one's



particular views may be, anybody who professes to be able to talk reasonably about education and to proceed in practical terms in ways that can be shown to be reasonable, will need to be able to show that he has a pretty good grasp of such concepts as education, understanding, indoctrination, rationality, culture, needs, interests, and wants, which in one way or another are central to the enterprise in question. Such concepts remain the core of this book.

Robin Barrow  
SFU Vancouver  
1988

### Notes

- 1 Throughout the book we continue to use inverted commas when referring to a word (e.g. 'gay' is a confusing word), but not when referring to the concept (e.g. many gays are sad).
- 2 I have in mind the charge that some would make, to the effect that recent initiatives combine to transmit the values of free enterprise and industry as if they were uncontentious. One might add the concern of some that such subjects as peace studies and sex education may become exercises in indoctrination.
- 3 Barrow, R. and Milburn, G., *A Critical Dictionary of Educational Concepts* (Brighton, Wheatsheaf, 1986).



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