

# PHILOSOPHICAL DOCUMENTS IN EDUCATION

Ronald F. Reed  
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Edited by

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## **Philosophical Documents in Education**

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# Introduction

*P*hilosophical Documents in Education rests on a very basic assumption—that students of education, and potential and practicing teachers, can learn something of significance in terms of both theory and practice from reading, thinking about, and discussing the great philosophic tradition in education. Thus, this book is an attempt to bring that tradition to you in such a way that you may understand it and use it to formulate your own theory and practice.

We recognize, of course, that philosophical writing is not the easiest thing to read and understand. Frequently, it is rife with technical language, refers back to previous books and articles with which readers may not be familiar, and, in general, has a density and rigor of presentation and argumentation that is not typical of much of the other writing to which students of education are exposed.

As much as possible, we have tried to minimize the first two characteristics. The articles and excerpts presented here have a limited amount of technical language. You will not need to have an extensive philosophical vocabulary in order to read the articles. In addition, although the articles exist within a tradition and, as such, constitute a sort of conversation both among themselves and with articles and philosophers not presented here, explicit reference to other articles, and the corresponding assumption that readers will be familiar with those articles, has been avoided. The articles and excerpts, we believe, stand on their own.

The last characteristic, however, is a different story. A powerful philosophical position or argument cannot be reduced to a sentence or a paragraph without significant loss of force, evocativeness, and beauty. As readers of philosophy, we tend to distrust capsule summaries, and as editors, we have avoided them.

Recognizing that students do not have unlimited time and energy, however, we have tried to limit the volume and number of the excerpts. The text is deliberately lean, and it is our hope that you will treat the excerpts as you would poetry: Read them slowly, carefully, and frequently.

The text is comprised of selections from 15 philosophers. Classical philosophers such as Plato, Augustine, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Dewey are represented here. At the same time, we have tried to provide a wide range of contemporary commentary on the philosophical ramifications of educational issues. Thus we have included selections from Paulo Freire, Maxine Greene, Cornel West, and Richard Rorty, among others. A benefit of the contemporary slant is that it exposes readers to the views of women and minorities, views that are typically underrepresented in foundation anthologies.

Each selection comes with a brief, informal introductory essay on the philosopher. These are meant to give you an impressionistic feel for the philosopher and what she or he was attempting to do. The thread that ties the introductory essays together is our attempt to frame the selections within the context of a basic question: What are the characteristics of an educated person?

We have also provided historical-biographical time lines on each, and a series of questions at the end of each chapter that are meant to open up the text for students.

Anthologies, of necessity, are selective and limited and reflect the interests, values, perspectives, and biases of the compilers. They are always open to legitimate criticism: Why this philosopher and not that? Why, in this anthology, Dewey and not Whitehead? Why this excerpt and not that? In this anthology, why the *Apology* but no reference to the *Meno* and the remembrance theory of knowledge?

Every anthology will have its idiosyncracies. Every anthology will reflect the particular purposes—and biases—of those who compiled it, no matter how comprehensive it is intended to be. *This* anthology is not intended to be comprehensive. This anthology is meant to serve as an *invitation* to a tradition of scholarship. If you accept the invitation, if you use this anthology as a means for going deeper into that tradition, if you use it as a stepping-stone to further reading, we will consider our purpose achieved. It is our hope that you will realize the limits of this anthology and go beyond it to its sources.

View this anthology as a door through which you might enter a room in which an extended conversation about educational issues is taking place. The door has specific historical and geographic dimensions—it is pragmatic, it is Western, and so on—but once you have moved through it into the room, things become interestingly complex. Read any of the scholars in this anthology, take them seriously, go beyond the excerpts and articles you'll find here and read the original manuscripts, see the excerpts in their contexts, and almost inevitably you will begin a journey that corrects the inherent limitations of the anthology. Dewey will lead the inquiring student to Whitehead (and both might introduce you to such analytic thinkers as Israel Scheffler and R. S. Peters). The *Apology*

will lead you to the *Meno*. The Western tradition itself will foster an examination of its roots in and connections to the Middle and Far East.

The door that this anthology provides opens into a room that is almost without limits—a room in which conversation about the nature and purpose of education takes place.



## chapter 1

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# Socrates and Plato

### TIME LINE FOR SOCRATES

- 470 BC** Is born in Athens, Greece, the son of Sophroniscus, a stone mason, and Phaenarete, a midwife.
- 470–400** Grows up during the “golden age” of Greece—his father, an intimate friend of the son of Aristides the Just, provides Socrates an acquaintanceship with the members of the Pericles circle.
- Serves with valor in the Peloponnesian War.
- Marries Xanthippe. They have seven or eight children.
- Is declared the wisest man by the Oracle at Delphi.
- Is put on trial for corrupting the minds of the youth of Athens.
- 399** Is found guilty and forced to drink hemlock.

*Socrates wrote nothing. All that we know of him is from the writings of Aristophanes (The Clouds), Plato, and Xenophon.*

### TIME LINE FOR PLATO

- 427 BC** Is born in Athens, Greece, to a prominent family. Following his father's death his mother marries Pyrilampes, a close friend of Pericles.
- 405–400** Studies with Socrates.

- 399 Attends the trial and execution of Socrates.
- 387 Establishes the Academy. Later, Eudoxius, respected mathematician, unites his school, located at Cyzicus, with the Academy.
- 367 Accepts Aristotle into the Academy.
- 347 Dies in Athens.

*Although scholars continue to debate the time frame of Plato's writings, the following are generally attributed to each period:*

- Early Period** Works, usually referred to as Socratic dialogues, focus on ethics. Included in this period are *Apology*, *Crito*, *Charmides*, *Laches*, *Euthyphro*, *Euthydemus*, *Cratylus*, *Protagoras*, and *Gorgias*.
- Middle Period** Works focus on theory of ideas and metaphysical doctrines. Included in this period are *Meno*, *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, *The Republic*, and *Phaedrus*.
- Late Period** Works focus on a reconsideration of the middle period, most notably the theory of ideas. Included in this period are *Theaetetus*, *Parmenides*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Philebus*, *Timaeus*, and *The Laws*.

## INTRODUCTION

*Philosophy begins in the West with a group of philosophers variously known as the natural philosophers or the pre-Socratics. Men—and the history of Western philosophy has been dominated by males—such as Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Parmenides, Empedocles, and Heraclitus were all engaged in an attempt to discover the secrets of the natural world, to reduce the mass of phenomena to a few manageable principles, and to understand their natural environments. What held them together was a belief that one could reason one's way to the truth, that by looking at natural effects one could deduce their causes. What distinguished one from the other was that they each reasoned their way to different causes. For some the natural world was reducible to one immovable substance. For others, there were four basic elements (earth, air, fire, and water). Others saw five or six or even more basic causes.*

*This led a group of philosophers, the Sophists, to react against the program of the natural philosophers. Where the natural philosophers assumed that an educated person, a wise person, was one who knew the truth about things natural, the Sophists claimed that since "reason" generated so many different conclusions, there was something unreliable about reason itself. If, the Sophists suggested, reason were a reliable tool, it should always yield the same results. It did not; hence, the Sophists shifted inquiry away from an*



*attempt to discover the truth about the natural world to an attempt to teach a useful skill.*

*The Sophists were the first professional teachers. They went around to the families of young boys—again, notice this orientation toward males—and offered to teach those boys how to argue persuasively. The Sophists said, in effect: We don't care what your position is. We don't care whether you are telling the truth or not. We will teach you how to make your case and how to win arguments. This was an especially valuable skill because eventually those boys would, as heads of households, have to speak in the public forums that constituted Greek democracy. If they could not speak well, their family's fortune would suffer.*

*Into this mix—a mix that included a switch from the educated person as she or he who knew the truth about the natural world to the educated person as she or he who could argue persuasively regardless of the truth or falsity of the position—came the character Socrates.*

*If one reads the dialogue Apology carefully, one will see that two of the accusations against Socrates suggest that Socrates was both a natural philosopher and a Sophist at the same time. Certainly, since one was a reaction against the other, Socrates cannot be both. But what was Socrates? What was his doctrine? Why was he so important? We will try to answer those questions in the second part of this introduction.*

*Most of what we know about Socrates comes from three sources. Socrates did not write; indeed, he distrusted the written word, and so we must rely on the plays of Aristophanes and the dialogues of Xenophon and Plato.<sup>1</sup> For our purposes, we will concentrate on those writings that are clearly the most important, both philosophically and historically, that is, the writing of Socrates' student, Plato.*

*Most commentators divide Plato's writing into three major periods. In the early dialogues, Apology, Charmides, and Phaedo for example, Plato gives a fairly accurate portrayal of Socrates. Plato was almost like a "fly on the wall" or a tape recorder, and one "bears" dialogues that may actually have taken place; this is the place to go to find out what Socrates was about and what he was teaching. In the middle period, The Republic is a good example of Plato's using Socrates to espouse his (Plato's) own doctrine. That doctrine is called the Theory of the Forms, and the middle period is the place to go if one wants to see what the mature Plato thought. Toward the end of his career, Plato had some doubts about his theory; in later dialogues like Parmenides, Theaetetus, and Sophist, one sees Plato rethinking and, perhaps, rejecting the theory. At the same time, because Socrates was Plato's mouthpiece in the middle period, the character of Socrates now becomes a minor figure, becomes a figure of ridicule and scorn, or drops out altogether. The later dialogues are not the place to go to get an accurate picture of Socrates.*

*So who was Socrates and what did he espouse? The dialogue Apology is probably the best place to start. As mentioned previously, Socrates was on trial*