

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Studies in Philosophies, Schooling, and
Educational Policies

EDWARD J. POWER

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When we do, we come to the most ancient of educational disciplines: educational philosophy. It is the business of educational philosophy to probe the fundamental issues of education and to supply some direction with respect to what ought to be done in order to achieve and maintain educational decency. This book is intended as a beginning, but only a beginning, to the serious matter of establishing educational philosophy as a discipline.

PREFACE

As an introduction to educational philosophy, the book is divided into four parts. Part I introduces the study of educational philosophy, illustrates its varying purposes as these purposes are disclosed in different philosophies of education, and considers the status of educational philosophy as an academic discipline. Since educational philosophy has a long and rich historical record, one of the objectives of Part I is to provide the reader with an historical perspective in connection with this ancient educational discipline.

Part II continues the introduction. The reader is given basic information about principal systematic educational philosophies. Sometimes on certain points, these philosophies conflict; sometimes they agree. In paying attention to systematic philosophies of education, a sensitivity to a contemporary shift away from the systematic approach and to the assumption that educational philosophy has an intrinsic relationship to general philosophy is developed. In any case, the reason for dealing with these philosophies is to ensure a respectable level of philosophical

Almost from the time men and women began to occupy this planet, historians tell us, they paid heed to the education of their children. They expected it, among other things, to prepare for life and sometimes to improve the conditions and quality of life in society. As men and women evolved in history and as their social order became increasingly complex, they gave greater attention to the education of succeeding generations. As education matured in a maturing social order, the people generally expected it to be more effective personally and socially. It is an easy exercise to demonstrate how the entire educational process has been improved in succeeding historical periods and it is possible to make a confident assertion that the means for education have never been superior to what they are today.

Yet elements of uncertainty and discord remain to plague us. Despite high expectations for education, on one hand, and with a science of education that has never been more perceptive, productive, and dependable, on the other, the schools are frequently the center of controversy. Agreement with respect to education's scope, to what it should accomplish, and to how it should deploy its resources and techniques is by no means easy to obtain. Along these lines, it seems clear, the science of education—for all its evident accomplishments—cannot be of much help. The science of education is inevitably descriptive and theoretical. It is never normative. It cannot tell us what to do in education. We must look elsewhere for guidance.

When we do, we come to the most ancient of educational disciplines: educational philosophy. It is the business of educational philosophy to probe the fundamental issues of education and to supply some direction with respect to what ought to be done in order to achieve and maintain educational decency.

This book is intended as a beginning, but only a beginning, to the serious matter of establishing educational priorities both with respect to educational objectives and educational means. It could bear the title *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*.

As an introduction to educational philosophy, the book is divided into four parts. Part I introduces readers to the study of educational philosophy, illustrates its varying purposes as these purposes are disclosed in different philosophies of education, and considers the status of educational philosophy as an academic discipline. Since educational philosophy has a long and rich historical record, one of the objectives of Part I is to provide the reader with an historical perspective in connection with this ancient educational discipline.

Part II continues the introduction. The reader is given basic information about principal systematic educational philosophies. Sometimes, on certain points, these philosophies conflict; sometimes they agree. In paying attention to systematic philosophies of education, a sensitivity to a contemporary drift away from the systems' approach and to the assumption that educational philosophy has an intrinsic relationship to general philosophy is developed. In any case, the reason for dealing with these philosophies is to ensure a respectable level of philosophical literacy. Part II, in addition, shows how educational philosophy's place may be taken by a theory of schooling, so the contemporary theories of schooling have also been introduced.

Part III, recognizing the relationship in educational philosophy between principle, policy, and practice, centers attention on educational policies that arise from philosophical and practical considerations relative to human nature, to educational purpose, to the content of the curriculum, and to methods and techniques for conducting the educational enterprise.

Were contemporary society immune to educational controversy and conflict over the fundamentals of educational policy, Part IV would be unnecessary. Such, however, is not the case, so Part IV takes a balanced, prudent, and philosophical view of the most frequently disputed issues in contemporary educational policy.

Few books on educational philosophy, and certainly not this one, could be written without help from others. For the most part this help came from both recent and remote literature. Educational philosophy is not a field of inquiry characterized by intellectual fluidity, so one should be neither surprised nor disappointed to find that some of the references—especially those pertaining to philosophical systems—are old. Although they may be old, ideas of consequence in educational philosophy are never out-of-date. I have done my best to indicate these sources of indebtedness. At the same time, in the readings following each

chapter, and in the general bibliography, I have included titles to tempt readers and students who, after being introduced to the philosophy of education, have not yet satisfied their intellectual appetites for probing important, frequently imperative, and sometimes universal educational issues.

Edward J. Power

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I

EDUCATIONAL
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AND
PERSPECTIVE

I

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WHAT IS EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY?

In the course of Western civilization men and women debated the things that mattered most to them. They argued, for example, about politics, war, and economics with varying degrees of insight, zeal, and sophistication. In debating what to do about them they always argued from a platform of conviction. What was the source of this conviction? Sometimes, scholars tell us, it was lodged in myth, sometimes in tradition, sometimes in religious faith, and sometimes in reason. Almost nothing in the unfolding of human history occurred as sheer accident. Even when the course of events proved their exponents wrong, action taken along any one of these lines was always supported by what appeared to be good and convincing justification.

Politics and economics, historians tell us, were controlled by persons of social position and authority, for these subjects, even in their infancy, were wrapped in subtleties and obscurities too complicated for the ken of common men. Military strategy and tactics were soon upgraded to become the business of experts, religion the reservation of theologians, tradition a preserve for scholars, and law, while it might exist in heaven, belonged on earth in the hands of the strong.

Yet, outside the narrow circle where courage and cunning counted so much were the so-called ordinary people. They went about their daily chores with what sometimes amounted to a deadening routine, but as they bowed to the demands of necessity they also paid constant heed to the care and upbringing of their children.

We know enough about the lives of our ancestors to know how seldom their hope for their children was inflated, but they were nevertheless solicitous about

their training and education. As often as not this tutelage of children in the bosom of the family never counted for much on a scale of authentic educational decency, but the simplicity and rusticity of its character is only one side of a long chronicle.

The other side, the one catching and holding our attention, is the interest persons in every society invested in the care and training of those who would become the next generation of adults. Neither position of authority nor, for that matter, trained intelligence was needed to recognize that whatever society's arrangement of its priorities, the care and training of children headed the list.

Often inarticulate and seldom profound, sometimes with but frequently without design, generation after generation of our forefathers pondered the issue of how to prepare children for their places in society. Even when they were not fully aware of what they were doing, they were planning for education and, in a sense, constructing a philosophy for it.

In the last analysis, whatever form it may take, and however abstruse or sophisticated it may become, and wherever it is found in contemporary society, educational philosophy is a plan for allowing each succeeding generation to fulfill itself and take its place in an increasingly complex and often confusing world. Such a quick and simple definition of educational philosophy, while accurate enough, nevertheless conceals almost as much as it reveals about the many sides of the educational enterprise.

It is necessary to pause from time to time to get our bearings and to examine in some detail varieties of such plans and the fundamental propositions or convictions on which they are based. A place to begin is with the various purposes either assumed by or assigned to educational philosophy.

PURPOSE OF EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

One has a right to ask any academic discipline to explain itself and to tell persons about to embark on its study what may be expected from such an expenditure of time and talent. Over the years wise men and some not so wise have asked philosophy to justify its existence; in poring over an abundance of educational literature we find that the same inquiry is commonly directed at educational philosophy.

Is philosophy, regardless of the human endeavor with which it essays to deal, simply an academic exercise that, while tempting in intricacy and generous in conundrum, adds up to nothing? Can it be that the time and effort spent by educators, philosophers, and educational philosophers inquiring into almost every side of formal and informal education, of training, and of character building are wasted, and that, in the final analysis, nothing convincing or illuminating can be said about the whole matter of preparing future generations to take their places in society?

Undertaking to persuade persons of its reasonable and responsible purpose, educational philosophy, along with its more ancient forebear, philosophy, has

marked out certain routes that it is capable of taking. We should be clear about these routes, for there are many, and not every educator or educational philosopher is ready to count all of them legitimate. So we find the purpose of educational philosophy being characterized as *inspirational, analytical, prescriptive, and investigative*. It is worth our while to spend some time examining the meaning and implications of these characterizations. And this may be done best, we think, by using the writings of educational philosophers to illustrate the various purposes at work.

Educational Philosophy's Inspirational Purpose

As an inspirational enterprise educational philosophy means to put on exhibit as a model some organization of teaching and learning that is judged ideal. As we look for illustrations of educational philosophy expressed in utopian language, we are naturally enough attracted to educational philosophy's two classical and universally recognized utopias: Plato's (427?-347 B.C.) *Republic*¹ and Rousseau's (1712-1778) *Émile*.² Both *The Republic* and *Émile* have stood the critical test of classical stature—time—and both can be said to belong on a list of great books no educated person leaves unread, but for illustrating the inspirational function of educational philosophy, they are not equally satisfactory.

Plato's Republic Writing *The Republic*, Plato meant to describe an educational plan that would always be superior for preparing versatile and responsible citizens, but he did not stop with description.³ He went on to justify the ideal credentials of his plan and came close to requiring its acceptance by any state wanting to enjoy success in the ancient world.

He took the trouble, moreover, to review and criticize the educational plans of the states with which he was familiar. His extensive travel familiarized him with many, and he ended up with the chilly proviso that any state failing to follow the regimen outlined would not only suffer civic decline but would also strip from its citizens any chance to realize their native talent. Description abounds in Plato's bold work, but direction is abundant as well. To find an illustration of philosophy's inspirational purpose we shall have to leave Plato and turn to Rousseau.

Rousseau's Émile. Jean Jacques Rousseau generously praised Plato's *Republic* as "the finest treatise on education ever written." Along with Plato he acknowledged that, left uneducated, men are "the most savage of earthly creatures."⁴ But he began his educational novel, for a novel is what *Émile* is, with the intention of giving his readers a picture of an ideal education, one designed for the boy Emile, and he never abandoned his original intention.

When we read *Émile* we find an educational plan full of novelty and innovation. We find, moreover, that as Emile lives in a country retreat he learns what nature wants to teach him on one hand and what his own nature says is good and useful on the other. Almost certainly Rousseau means to attract our attention and elicit our approval, but he never sets before his readers any unalterable course or direction for education to follow. He merely describes what he considers to be

the ideal and is willing to leave to us the choice of adopting or rejecting it as our own plan.

Most scholars who have studied Rousseau's *Émile* agree that his utopian plan was either hard or impossible to imitate except by people of high social rank able to afford tutors for their children.⁵ The most astute of Rousseau's disciples always knew that his educational story was meant only for illustration and that before any of the principles buried away in it could be followed, they would have to work out methods suitable to their own condition. To come to this conclusion they had only to read the preface to *Émile*: "The greater or less ease of execution depends on a thousand circumstances which it is impossible to define except in a particular application of the method to this country or that, to this condition or that; and those particular applications are no part of my plan."⁶

Bacon's New Atlantis. To some extent Francis Bacon's (1561–1626) *New Atlantis*⁷ also belongs to this category of an inspirational philosophy, a utopian plan for the education of men and women. But Bacon too often ranges beyond educational to scientific and sociological questions, so it is hard to maintain with any assurance that the *New Atlantis* has any, or many, of the credentials of an educational philosophy.

In any case, scholars allege, Bacon was engaged in demonstrating the worth of induction as a way of accumulating dependable knowledge more than in trying to design a place for or a way of disseminating it. According to Bacon, discovery, reached through inductive rather than deductive methods, was to be a huge cooperative social effort; and he was supremely confident that knowledge was more dependably supported by starting with particular cases in experience and drawing general conclusions from them than by beginning with general propositions, first principles, or syllogistic conclusions and then applying them to the particulars of human experience.⁸

Summerhill. Coming closer to contemporary times, the book by A. S. Neill (1883–1973), *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing*,⁹ appears to fulfill the specifications of an inspirational plan, although it has marked deficiencies as an educational philosophy: It stops short of any commitment to instruction and is careless about considerations of considerable import—such as the nature of the person and the nature of knowledge—which are essential to an authentic educational philosophy. Neill, moreover, dismissed methods of teaching "because we do not consider that teaching itself matters very much."¹⁰

Philosophy's Inspirational Purpose Today. Although educational philosophy has adopted, and sometimes promotes, an inspirational purpose, there is little point in dwelling on this purpose for it is neither popular nor preferred among educational philosophers today. In the long run, too little is to be gained by simply setting forth an ideal, or what is assumed to be an ideal, and then leaving the matter of its being adopted either to good will of persons or to chance in events.

Few educational philosophers are content merely to state their case and put trust in its inner logic and natural appeal for adoption. As a class, educational

philosophers want to be influential and to have their plans paid heed, so they refuse to engage in what is only an antiseptic exercise. More exactly, they see, probably more clearly than their utopian predecessors, the relationship between theory and practice, between the ideal and the actual. They refuse to allow themselves to be simply interesting, exciting, and, perhaps, innovative in pronouncement but inconsequential in practice.

To stay too long with or to develop too much affection for philosophy as an inspirational enterprise would give additional ammunition to critics who dispense with all philosophy as only an exercise in toying with language, which in the end neither wants nor is able to affect the course of real life.

Educational Philosophy's Analytical Purpose

Every educational philosopher, regardless of allegiance to one or another philosophy, is prepared to be critical and analytical in separating principle and policy into their component parts and holding them up for scrutiny of their meaning, their validity, and their efficacy. Every systematic educational philosophy also takes pardonable pride in its penetrating analysis of the constituents of educational philosophy before melding them into a comprehensive code relative to educational ends and means.

We need read only samples from Plato's dialogues,¹¹ for example, to hear Socrates ask question after question of famous Sophists, never to be entirely satisfied with their answers. He always wanted more. He wanted definitions of justice, truth, temperance, and prudence rendered precisely. He wanted thickets of linguistic confusion cleared away and complex ideas clarified so meaning could shine through. Socrates' detractors charged him with quibbles over words, and they said he wasted time chasing the elusive "god of certitude" when he should have been helping them find solutions to the practical problems of life in the town of Athens.

They missed Socrates' point: He was as eager as they to attend to everyday affairs, but he wanted to stand on a dependable ground of truth before turning his hand to action. Plato's work may stand as the finest example of analysis in philosophical discourse. But every book ever written on educational philosophy, from the best to the worst, has employed analysis as a method of sorting out the good from the bad, the dependable from the undependable, the true from the false, and the prudent from the imprudent. Some philosophers have shown more talent than others in exercising critical judgment and using methods of analysis, but none has ever abandoned either in drawing on the data of human experience to find signs pointing in the direction education should take.

Linguistic Analysis and Logical Empiricism. Yet, paying attention to analytic technique as the common currency of philosophic exchange will not lead us to a clear understanding of what is currently called educational philosophy's analytic purpose. It is better to depend on the assertions of exponents of the analytic school (either linguistic analysts or logical empiricists) of educational

philosophy: Analysis, they say with almost one voice, is educational philosophy's sole purpose.

As a method, analysis is a way of looking at educational issues and nothing more. It entertains neither pretensions about establishing goals for education, about saying what should be taught and how, nor enthusiasm for telling educational institutions how to meet critical social issues face to face. After stating disclaimers as precisely as possible, analysts go on to embrace one principal commission: to clarify the language used to express thought in order to be as accurate as possible about the meaning (or its lack) in connection with anything said about education. Although it is probably unfair to charge analysts with indifference to thought (say, the content of educational philosophy), the burden of their study clearly rests on the use of language as a medium of expression.

Moreover, when analysts start with the assumption that most educational propositions are either propaganda, or at least unscientific assertions, they are confident that linguistic analysis will reveal their weakness. When they allege that most statements about educational ends and means are clumsy and inexact, both in form and formulation, they feel that analytic technique can help supply definition and precision. When the complexities of the educational process conceal the distinction between, for example, cognitive achievement and the formation of sound ethical character, they point to analysis as the technique for disclosing the distinction.

Skillful analysts can be called on to testify against vacuous theories and hypotheses which, it is said, abound in educational discussion and discourse. Used adroitly, analysis can illustrate the difference between dependable knowledge and whim, exhortation, or mere guess, which it is alleged all too often pass under the guise of truth. In the end, by concentrating on analysis of language and meaning, the enterprise of educational philosophy can become a scientifically enlightened human undertaking with wishful and unscientific thinking pared away.

Justifiers of educational philosophy's analytic purpose are diffident in their promise for it. They tell us how much logic and grammar can contribute to clarity of educational purpose, how a systematic deployment of the arts of mind and expression can illustrate meaning or indict propositions without meaning, but they never define educational purpose. They never set forth those principles on which curricula can stand, or recommend methods of teaching for schools and classrooms. They appear content to leave all this to others. As methodologists, as practicing critics of education, they refuse to proceed beyond an analysis of what has been said about education, and they seem comfortable with their declaration that analysis "has no direct implications for education."¹²

After taking into account the disposition of all educational philosophers to be critical and analytical, and recognizing that this disposition alone does not illustrate philosophy's analytic purpose, we are tempted to close our histories and begin our search for models in education's contemporary literature. If we renewed our review of educational philosophy's history, however, and were careful to interpret what we found, we should very likely conclude that Francis Bacon's