

An Introduction to Philosophy of Education

J.A.Akinpelu

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PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

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An Introduction to
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For
Remi, Yemisi, Bayo
and their Generation

Preface and Acknowledgements

There is a dearth of suitable books on the philosophy of education course in most Colleges and Faculties of Education in Nigeria and most other African countries. Though more and more foreign books on modern philosophy of education are being imported, especially since the break through by R.S. Peters and his contemporaries, these books are unsuitable in a number of respects.

First and foremost, they treat the subject from the most current, modern perspective without incorporating those useful elements in the abandoned approaches. Hence what we have in them are mainly analyses of educational concepts and problems in education without much regard for the prescriptive guidelines which earlier modes of doing philosophy included, and which have more meaning for the teacher in the classroom.

Secondly, the themes that the students in our Colleges and University Faculties of Education are expected to cover in their courses on philosophy of education are usually not available in a compact form or in a single book. John Brubacher's *Modern Philosophies of Education* which had attempted to bring such themes together in a single volume is out-dated, and is in any case no longer easily accessible.

Thirdly, those books on philosophy of education that I am familiar with are by foreign authors and, therefore, reflect mainly or even solely foreign values, references and instances. While it is conceded that there is an inevitable universal element in such disciplines as philosophy, there is no doubt that philosophy and philosophy of education can also be culturally influenced.

In this book, I have tried to provide remedies to the three defects noted above. I have written the book from an eclectic point of view, and with the didactic impact of it always in the forefront. Hence various aspects of the philosophy of education have been included, and special efforts made to treat them with regard to their relevance to the system and the processes of education. An attempt has also been made to include items that are of special interest to Africa in general, and Nigeria in particular. These are in addition to the many African and Nigerian references and instances that litter the book.

In general, it is envisaged that this book will be found most useful by all who are in the teaching profession, whether as student-teachers or as practising professionals. All parents who are interested in what goes on in the teaching-learning transactions that take place in the classrooms, can also read the book to advantage.

In writing the book, I owe debts of gratitude to a number of people and institutions. First to the generations of my teachers who initiated me into the academic world, and especially into the teaching profession. I have no regrets whatsoever. Secondly, there are the generations of students to whom I have taught courses on philosophy of education, and therefore have been literally 'guinea-pigs' for some of the ideas expressed in this book. Thirdly, there are my friends, colleagues and even former students who have read parts of this book and have offered me their valuable comments and suggestions. It is tempting to name names, but that can be invidious except if it is possible to name all. Finally, to Ms Chiu-Yin Wong, the Senior Editor of the Macmillan Press, International College Division, UK, whose promptings and encouragements, offered in a most cultured manner, have speeded up the completion of the work.

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About Philosophy of Education

‘Philosophy *of* education’ and ‘philosophy *and* education’ are terms which are commonly used to describe the topic which we are treating in this chapter, but we shall stick to ‘philosophy *of* education’ as the more correct title. This is because the alternative, ‘philosophy *and* education’, seems to suggest that there are two separate components or two separate disciplines which we are desperately trying to link together. On the other hand, the term ‘philosophy *of* education’ (like philosophy *of* history, or *of* science) seems to place education in the centre, and philosophy becomes the tool with which to examine the subject-matter which is education. As Benjamin Brickman puts it, ‘Philosophy *of* . . .’ implies an inquiry into the fundamental nature of the field in question¹; it is not a derivative or deduction from some other field.

What, then, is philosophy of education? Before we answer this question, we ought to find out first what philosophy is. The term philosophy came from two ancient Greek words, which when combined meant ‘love of wisdom’, (*philosophia*), or probably more correctly ‘love of knowledge’. From this early usage, the word has passed into common usage, and different people have come to mean different things by it. For our purpose here, we shall consider two distinct but somehow related conceptions of what it is: these are the popular conception, or what Jonas F. Soltis calls the ‘public sense’², and the technical or professional sense.

THE POPULAR CONCEPTION OF PHILOSOPHY

In the popular sense of the word, philosophy is often used to characterise a person’s or a group of persons’ attitude to life.

By attitude here is meant the general pattern or the habitual way of response of the person to events. In this vein, also, but in a somewhat more developed sense, it is often used to characterise a person's expressed or observed world-view. This world-view may be the sum total of his assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, and prejudices which are partly inherited and partly acquired in the process of living. It is to either or both of these two senses that we sometimes refer when we claim to have a personal philosophy of life.

In the traditional African society, apart from the typical African world-view which has been correctly described as African philosophy, (for example, by Father Tempels in *Bantu Philosophy*), the term philosophy is also commonly used for the profound sayings of the elders, words which are both witty and pregnant with meanings — 'The words of our elders are words of wisdom.' Such words of wisdom find expression in proverbs, in incantations, or in oracular and prophetic sayings. And they are usually treated with deep respect not only because old age is generally held as synonymous with wisdom and experience, but more so, I think, because in the African world-view, the elders form the link with the departed, ancestral spirits, and the words they speak are therefore not their own, they are words of experience, the accumulated wisdom of generations that have passed to the great beyond. Closely allied to this conception are the oracular messages of the African gods, messages which by reason of their compactness, complexity and ambiguity only the wise can unravel. Such sayings at times may be so coherent and comprehensive as to form a clear or coherent world-view or philosophy. Such is the philosophy that the Yorubas of Nigeria have developed out of the corpus of the oracular sayings of their *Ifa* god.

PHILOSOPHY IN A TECHNICAL OR PROFESSIONAL SENSE

In the technical or professional sense, philosophy is conceived of as an academic discipline to which scholars devote their time and energy. It is characterised by logical, consistent and systematic thinking so as to reach conclusions that are sound, coherent and consistent in all their parts. To some, these the-

oretical conclusions or speculations are what philosophy is all about. To others, however, such conclusions need not be reached before a person is said to be engaged in philosophy: it is still philosophy if the aim is to clarify and explain the language with which we express our ideas. As F. W. Garforth puts it, 'to philosophise is to engage in a strenuous activity of thought [I would even say 'of thinking' to emphasise the active element in his definition] and to pursue it with no other aim than to satisfy the importunate questioning of the human mind' ³ .

In the two views mentioned above, the common element is the use of reason or logical argument as their tool. If one is to name one single characteristic element of philosophy, it is its absolute reliance on the use of logical reasoning; and by reasoning is meant examining every evidence in favour or against any claim, from a dispassionate and impartial point of view, exposing prejudices in claims that are put forward, and, in general, giving to every bit of evidence as much weight as it actually deserves. Another characteristic of philosophy is the tentative nature of whatever conclusions that may be reached. It shares with modern science the belief that no conclusions are so absolute and certain as to be immune to further future correction by new evidence. As Garforth again puts it: 'there belongs to the very nature of philosophy a refusal to take for granted, an attitude of scepticism which regards no conclusion as final and every matter, however apparently closed, as open to further question' ⁴ . Thus, we have two major conceptions of what philosophy is among professional philosophers. There is the idea of philosophy as a speculative activity in which one tries by means of reasoning to build up a coherent and consistent world-view or the ideal world that ought to be; then, there is the second idea that philosophy should be confined to defining concepts, and analysing and criticising statements and propositions. In both activities, however, logical reasoning and healthy scepticism are common characteristics. But so much for what philosophy is.

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

In considering what people mean by philosophy of education, we shall also identify two senses, the commonsense or the layman's notion, and the technical or professional conception of what it is.

The Commonsense Notion

When people talk of 'philosophy of education' in ordinary discussions, they often mean their personal view of what the school should be doing or their own attitude to the education system. Such discussions often arise when people feel dissatisfied with the product of the school system, and in trying to criticise what they find as faulty in the present system, they refer to their own supposedly more adequate philosophy. By and large this philosophy of education is no more than a vague expression of their prejudice, based in most cases on the type of education which they themselves had received. The expression is coloured by their frustration, and is not a product of a deliberate and searching look at the system. Again, in such a situation, there can be as many philosophies of education as there are individuals who care to express an opinion.

Politicians are fond of referring to the education philosophy which, if elected to office, they would adopt. By this they probably mean no more than the programmes of education which they are going to follow, indicating the general trend or orientation rather than a systematically thought-out, profound or comprehensive view. It is occasionally a catchphrase, a slogan, that they use, like 'our philosophy of qualitative education', or 'pragmatic and functional education', or 'education from the grassroots', which catches the attention of voters during electioneering campaigns.

On the other hand, however, some enlightened citizens, especially educators, may ask a principal of a secondary school what is his school's philosophy. By this, they mean what are the objectives or goals which the school is trying to achieve, thereby equating such objectives with philosophy of education. Of course, such objectives are, in a sense, an expression of the values which education should achieve, but

they are only part of the educational philosophy, not the whole of it. To this inquiry, an articulate principal may respond by quoting the motto of his school, for example, 'For Knowledge, God and Service'. In such a situation, there will be as many philosophies of education as there are secondary schools, and one motto can be as good as any other.

All these views fall short of an adequate idea of philosophy of education, they only embody parts of such a philosophy. They are generally vague, and in any case, they are not based on systematic thought of what type of man they want to produce, in what type of world or society he would live, and what types of values he would cherish. If these ideas exist at all, they do so at the back of their minds and are not made subject to scrutiny and analysis.

Professional or Technical Sense

The professional philosopher of education is in a position to provide this thorough and hard look at the educational system, to analyse it, and after deep reflection to produce an alternative system. Both the *process* of analysis and reflection, and the *product* of that reflection are what the professionals mean by philosophy of education. As in their views on philosophy, there is a sharp disagreement among them, however, as to which of the two really qualifies to be called philosophising about education. Some stress that it is the activity of reflecting upon, analysing and criticising the current educational system and processes that really deserves to be called philosophy of education; the product of such a reflection or the building up of an alternative system is not their task. Others argue, however, that the process of asking questions and criticising is not in itself complete except if it is followed by a clear statement of a positive and more rational alternative. I agree with the latter group because educating is a practical activity and the end-objective of all analysis should be the improvement of that activity. Vain is the word of the philosopher which does not result either in enhancing the process of education or the educational system as a whole.

At this point we may consider the views of two eminent philosophers of education as to how they defined the discip-

line, and how in particular they related philosophy to education. For George Newsome (Jr), philosophy of education is the *application of philosophy to education*. This is a simple but deceptive statement, as we shall soon see. Another philosopher, John Dewey, simply equated philosophy with education. But, first let us consider the view of George Newsome. We shall quote his statements and then add a few comments.

George Newsome has sketched out some of the interpretations that might be given to the phrase 'applying philosophy to education' in the following ways:⁵

Philosophy might be applied by applying the answers philosophers have given to various questions that might be of concern to education.

In commenting on this, we may note that philosophers are remarkably notorious for not arriving at quotable answers; they in fact often raise more questions than they care to answer. Some would even argue that modern philosophy is not meant to answer questions, rather it is to make people express their ideas clearly and unambiguously. Therefore, such answers as may be got from philosophy must be very few and only partially relevant or applicable, since the answers were not forged out in tackling specific educational problems. So, this sense of application is of little use.

Philosophy might also be applied to education by utilising the methods, tools, techniques, and such, of philosophy in investigating problems of formal schooling.

This sense of application would appear to be more acceptable to most educational philosophers, if by that is not meant inconclusive analysis, or infinitely prolonged arguments in the face of educational problems that cry out for solution. While the method of analysis has a way of clarifying issues and dissolving pseudo-problems, the issues in education can hardly wait for agreement to be secured on the concepts and terminologies, especially where a teacher is trying to restore discipline in a class of forty unruly students. In spite of this comment, this interpretation of 'application' is still one of the most useful for defining philosophy of education.

Philosophy can be applied to education in yet another way. One might utilise world-frames, systems of philosophy, and the like, to explain or interpret education.

This sense of application is only partially helpful, in that it is a model worked out in one context being *adapted* to another context. The application might be forced since the two contexts are different. In any case, it makes philosophy of education a secondary activity subsidiary to the main interest which is philosophy.

Finally, one can apply philosophy to education by deducing educational implications from systematic philosophies.

Our comment on this is similar to the last, namely that such deductions might appear forced, and in any case such an interpretation of application places too great an emphasis on the difference between philosophy and education, and regards philosophy as the primary activity, but education as a by-product.

Thus, of the four ways suggested for applying philosophy to education, only the second model appears to be tolerably satisfactory; but in spite of that it does not eliminate the difference between education and philosophy: it still portrays education as borrowing some tools and techniques from another discipline. A model of educational philosophy that completely eliminates the dichotomy between education and philosophy is that advanced and used by John Dewey, the American pragmatic philosopher. For him, education and philosophy are the obverse and reverse of the same coin: they are both the same thing, only looked at from different angles. As he puts it: 'Philosophy of education is not an external application of ready-made ideas to a system of practice having a radically different origin and purpose The most penetrating definition of philosophy which can be given, then, is that it is the theory of education in its most general phases' ⁶ .

By the above statement, Dewey has integrated philosophy and education in that both deal with the same themes: both seek to solve the problems of living, and both deal with the problems of values, with what is good or bad, what is good