

**PHILOSOPHY
OF
EDUCATION**

PHILIP G. SMITH

PHILOSOPHY OF *Introductory Studies* EDUCATION

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Editor's Introduction

THIS BOOK, especially timely because its publication comes shortly before the author's accession to the presidency of the Philosophy of Education Society, will be read with interest because its orientation is rather unusual among texts dealing with educational philosophy.

There are other texts that are ostensibly designed to help a student *build* a philosophy of education, or possibly a philosophic understanding of education, but none of these seem to go about it quite as Dr. Smith's book does. The author's purpose is expressed on pp. 68-70, wherein he distinguishes philosophy of education from philosophies *and, in, and for* education. Placing this book within the category of books by Broudy, Kneller (ed.), Phenix, Scheffler (ed.), and Smith and Ennis (eds.), he proposes that this is a book on philosophy of education. In so being, it is "a study of the nature of the enterprise" of education, "a more or less independent disciplined area of study, comparable [to a degree at least] to philosophy of science," hence, "a changed conception of philosophy itself." Except for the texts by Broudy and Phenix, the above represent symposia; and those by Broudy and Phenix are ostensibly realist in philosophic orientation. Smith, though presumably sympathetic to pragmatic orientation, is, in this book, highly detached as to personal alignment, and in this way has written a book that is quite unique. Critics may make the charge that Dr. Smith has been noncommittal in approach, but they should take the foregoing into account before judging this a flaw.

Possibly, Dr. Smith is carrying forward and making more explicit the basic orientation of his mentor, the late Dr. H. Gordon Hullfish, with whom he collaborated in writing a previous book. If so, we feel that he has been successful. We consider this a significant book.

Ernest E. Bayles

Preface

THIS BOOK is intended for use in a first course in philosophy of education at the level of advanced undergraduate or beginning graduate study. No attempt has been made to put the course inside the covers of the book. I hope, rather, that the book contains enough information and ideas to enable students to profit from lectures, discussions, and assignments under the direction of a good instructor. The writing is brief enough so that the entire book can be assigned within a semester, yet the range of topics is comprehensive enough to permit the instructor plenty of elbow room. Such structured flexibility seems to be called for by the widely varied situations encountered these days by those who teach philosophy of education.

Any writing that attempts to be both brief and comprehensive is almost sure to have noticeable inadequacies. Fortunately, however, in selecting a textbook, instructors generally look for usefulness rather than perfection. In any event, while I must accept full responsibility for all of the shortcomings, it is a pleasure to acknowledge some of the assistance I have received.

Most of all, I am indebted to a great many students at several universities who, more patient than I would have been, listened and responded to much of the material in this book in the form of lectures. If there are lucid spots in the writing, it is because these students, from time to time, forced me into using understandable language.

I am also grateful to J. Donald Butler who read an early draft of the manuscript and made helpful comments, and to Ernest E.

Bayles who, very unselfishly, stayed with the manuscript and continued to make useful suggestions long after men of lesser stature would have been alienated by my obdurate refusal to change certain passages.

Elizabeth Maccia read Chapter 5 and made helpful comments and Lewis Bayles did the same for Chapter 8. Acknowledgements for the use of copyrighted materials appear at appropriate points throughout the book.

P.G.S.

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CHAPTER 1

What Is Philosophy?

LITERALLY, the word *philosophy* means *love of wisdom*. Some of the early philosophers were fond of pointing out that they did not claim to be wise men—merely lovers of wisdom. They were seekers after wisdom and, as teachers, they believed their role was one of helping others in the search for wisdom. There were other teachers known as *sophists*, a word which means literally *one who is wise*. Many sophists viewed teaching not so much as a process of assisting the student in a search for wisdom but rather as a matter of telling or giving the student, for a fee, certain information, skills, and conclusions, that made up the content of the education of a wise man. Such different points of view concerning what constitutes good teaching are still found today on most of our campuses.

Although it is the sophist view of teaching that is predominant in our schools, it is the term *philosopher* that is held in high esteem rather than such terms as *sophistry* and *sophisticate*. In all fairness to the early sophists, one should note that probably the main reason why our language reflects less respect for the sophist tradition than for the philosophic is because it turned out that the speculations of the early philosophers concerning the nature of man and the universe gained much wider popularity than speculations on the same topics by the early sophists. Actually, many of the sophists were reasonably modest men. They were teachers of such useful subjects as rhetoric, public speaking, and the like. For the most part they tended to be rather skeptical about man's ability to solve, with much certainty

or finality, such basic problems as "What is the nature of reality?" "What is the nature of knowledge?" and "What is the nature of value?" On the other hand, the answers given to these questions by philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle have exerted a dominating influence on human thought for more than two thousand years. Today the very language we use reflects, both in content and in structure, the thinking of these early Greek philosophers.

PHILOSOPHY AS AN ACTIVITY

In discussing the life and times of Socrates, Plutarch wrote:

Socrates neither set out benches for his students, nor sat on a platform, nor set hours for his lectures. He was philosophizing all the time—while he was joking, while he was drinking, while he was soldiering, whenever he met you on the street, and at the end when he was in prison and drinking the poison. He was the first to show that all your life, all the time, in everything you do, whatever you are doing, is the time for philosophy.

It is evident that for Socrates philosophy was an activity. A philosopher was a man who *philosophized*. Great philosophers have always understood this and, though most of them have devoted endless study to the work of other philosophers, each has struggled to state anew what seemed to him to be the most fundamental problems of man, and then, in his own terms, to develop a comprehensive and systematic body of speculative answers. A few have philosophized with such dazzling success that the effect of their work has frequently been more dominating than stimulating, so far as the philosophizing activity of teachers and students is concerned. Thus it is that many professors of philosophy become philosophically sophisticated and, in sophist fashion, dispense to students such information about philosophy as is thought requisite for an educated man. Thus, the title *philosopher* frequently becomes associated with the man who knows philosophy even though he engages in little or no philosophizing.

In recent times there has been an interesting return to an emphasis on philosophy as an activity. Wittgenstein, one of the influential persons in this movement, once said: "Philosophy is

not a theory but an activity. A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations. The result of philosophy is not a number of 'philosophical propositions,' but to make propositions clear."¹ According to this view philosophy is something that one does rather than a body of subject matter to be studied. This movement has become especially popular in England, so that today it is not uncommon to hear British philosophers speak of *doing philosophy*. Many contemporary students of philosophy believe, however, that the followers of this movement are doing philosophy in a much too limited way, for their activity is restricted largely to an analysis of language as used in ordinary discourse and in the more technical discussions of science and philosophy. Such linguistic analysis tends to become quite technical and to focus on the minute complexities of problems of limited scope. The work tends, therefore, to take on an esoteric quality that is likely to discourage the uninitiated. In reaction to these developments, one of the greatest of British philosophers has said, "Philosophy proper deals with matters of interest to the general educated public and loses much of its value if only a few professionals can understand what is said."²

The most common way in which teachers of philosophy have strayed from the philosophizing tradition is by confusing the history of philosophy with the philosophic activity. Certainly a knowledge and understanding of what philosophers have thought and felt about important problems is worthwhile. Indeed, discovering what problems various philosophers have considered important is, in itself, very frequently a stimulating and rewarding activity. It is not uncommon for students to discover that some of the world's greatest minds have struggled with the same problems that have disturbed them, problems that in the student's mind have remained so vague and amorphous that one hesitates to discuss them; yet they have a feeling of persistent importance attached to them so that they crop up again

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Harcourt, Brace & World, New York, 1922, p. 27.

² Bertrand Russell, *Human Knowledge*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1948, p. v.

and again in moments of solitary contemplation. To discover in the writings of some world renowned philosopher one's own private questions and speculations transformed into a series of well-formulated problems is often the very spur needed to start one on the road to more careful and persistent consideration of basic beliefs. And, of course, to follow the thinking of a first-rate mind, as it strives for clarity and precision of thought, may well be an excellent preparation for the struggle of pushing one's own life into more reflective levels.

Careful study of the philosophic activity of others remains, however, a study of history. No matter how thoroughly one understands someone else's philosophy, it is never a good substitute for understanding oneself—for transforming that conglomeration of beliefs and attitudes, that most of us depend upon, into at least the outline of a more comprehensive and harmonious outlook. This is one reason why Socrates repeatedly advised, *Know thyself*. C. I. Lewis, professor of philosophy at Harvard University, once said, "It is—I take it—a distinguishing characteristic of philosophy that it is everybody's business. The man who is his own lawyer or physician will be poorly served; but everyone both can and must be his own philosopher."³ Thus, it is sometimes said that everyone has a philosophy whether he knows it or not.

It usually turns out that each of us, as he begins to think more carefully about his basic beliefs, discovers that he has been serving himself rather poorly as a philosopher. We often find that either we don't know what we really do believe or else we are at a loss for any very convincing evidence or argument in support of our convictions. Moreover, we commonly find that, as we ponder the things we think we believe, they tend to conflict, one with another, rather than stand together in mutual support. How is it that we have managed to live so many years in such confusion? Why haven't our friends and associates noticed our difficulty and prodded us into doing something about it? And then we discover that our confusion has hardly been noticeable because so many of us are in the same boat.

³ C. I. Lewis, *Mind and the World Order*, Scribner, New York, 1929, p. 2.

Thus it is that we realize that to hold opinions about philosophic questions is not the same as to have a philosophy. To assert these opinions is one thing whereas to philosophize is something more.

In point of fact what does this universally possessed philosophy come to? It comes to something having less kinship with anything to be called a philosophy than with the job lot of odds and ends in Tom Sawyer's pocket. Insofar as the vast majority of us are equipped with anything resembling an outlook upon life and the world, it consists of a substratum of superstition about the supernatural, a smattering of social theory, a nest of group prejudices, a few wise saws, a rumor or two from science, a number of slipshod observations of life. To call this hodgepodge a philosophy is to take unwarranted liberty with language.⁴

LEARNING TO PHILOSOPHIZE

Socrates evidently believed that prior to earthly existence the spirit or soul of man existed in a realm of pure forms, a realm of ideal and perfect objects. As a result of the birth trauma, the memory of this empyreal existence was erased from the conscious mind. Through contemplation, especially when prodded and assisted by a sagacious teacher, many individuals could, however, recall some aspects of their prior existence and come to the realization that the objects of this world were but imperfect transitory copies of the pure, eternal forms. The most important knowledge was, of course, knowledge of the ideal or perfect forms and, as this knowledge was gained by recollection, the role of the teacher was that of "drawing out of the student" and bringing to the level of conscious recognition that which he already knew. In order to accomplish this, Socrates developed a method of teaching by questioning. He invited students to *teach him*, to give him the best answers they could to the questions he posed; and then, of course, he helped them to examine critically their own answers, to modify them, and to make them more and more adequate until finally by their own efforts they arrived at the truth. Socrates was sometimes called a "gadfly" and an "intel-

⁴ Max C. Otto, *Things and Ideals*, Holt, New York, 1924, p. 34.

lectual midwife." His activity finally became such a threat to entrenched ideas and interests that he was arrested and condemned to death for "corrupting his students."

Today we seldom encounter anyone who believes that knowledge is attained by recollecting a prior existence. But the Socratic method of teaching is generally recognized as an educationally sound procedure. Many philosophers, from Aristotle to John Dewey, have recognized that we learn to do by doing, and psychologists generally agree that we tend to appreciate most those things which we gain, at least in part, by our own efforts. We learn to philosophize by philosophizing.

Unfortunately, most of us do not find a Socrates to confront us with the kind of questions that impel us into a reflective or critical examination of our basic beliefs. As we have already noted, our friends and associates are likely to be leading the same sort of unreflective life as we, based on a similar conglomeration of attitudes, prejudices, and bits of knowledge sufficient to enable us to get on with our daily lives. Nor is it likely that by a simple act of will we can decide some morning to reconstruct ourselves so that thereafter we become our own Socrates, raising our own fundamental questions, challenging our own answers, striving always for the greatest possible depth and adequacy in thinking. Yet, if each of us both can and must be his own philosopher, each must learn to be his own Socrates.

This is one reason why many persons undertake a study of philosophy. They suspect that their own ideas are inadequate and they find in the study of philosophy the stimulation and challenge they need in order to attempt a more reflective mode of life. They read philosophy not only to find what questions great minds have considered most important and what answers most adequate but also to discover the *method of philosophy*. When one studies philosophy in this way, he is likely to discover that "to philosophize is not merely to read and to know philosophy; it is to think and to feel philosophically."⁵

⁵ Harold H. Titus, *Living Issues in Philosophy*, 2nd ed., American Books, New York, 1953, p. 6.

PHILOSOPHIC-MINDEDNESS

Learning to think and to feel philosophically may be compared to learning to be a good salesman. Good salesmanship is not merely something added to a person who is basically a poor salesman. Many large corporations have learned that it is not enough for a person simply to know the proper techniques of selling. They have discovered that a good salesman is a kind of person different from a poor salesman. Involved here are differences in temperament, attitudes, and personality. Studies have been made of the temperament and personality characteristics of successful salesmen. When individuals possessing such characteristics are selected for practical instruction in the techniques of selling the corporation's products, a much higher degree of success may then be anticipated.

We do not have much systematic study of how to effect a change in basic temperament and personality. Still, great teachers have always recognized that some basic reconstruction of individuals is necessarily involved in all true education. Today we are coming to a realization that one of the weaknesses of most of our institutions of higher learning is that four years of college life somehow fails to touch basic personality structure. Concerning fundamental values, a graduating senior is very largely the same *person* he was as an entering freshman.

Anyone who is serious about learning to philosophize should face the fact that, if successful, he will become a somewhat different person. The thought may be frightening. But why should it be? Physiologists tell us that we continually are becoming new persons. Many cells of our body are created, wear out, and are sloughed away. Such physiological changes are usually so gradual, however, that even after several years separation our old friends normally recognize us on sight. We should not be afraid to cast away some of our old, outworn, inadequate attitudes and beliefs. It is not likely that the change will be so radical or accomplished in so short a time that our identity will be lost. If old friends object to our gradually acquiring a more mature and

enriched personality, then perhaps we should reevaluate their friendship.

THE DIMENSIONS OF PHILOSOPHIC THINKING

When the characteristics of philosophic-minded persons are studied, they appear to cluster along three interrelated dimensions—comprehensiveness, penetration, and flexibility. Although these qualities characterize the total behavior of such persons, from the standpoint of the philosophizing activity we are interested in the way they are exhibited in the thinking of a person; in his problem-solving behavior, in his reflective life. Once these characteristics are understood it appears reasonable to hope that each of us, by constantly striving to develop these qualities in his own thinking, may gradually become a new person who may philosophize for himself with increasing adequacy and satisfaction.

Comprehensiveness

Perhaps the most obvious characteristic of a philosophic-minded person is his striving for comprehensiveness of outlook. Philosophy has sometimes been described as the attempt to see life steadily and see it as a whole, and Whitehead has said, "The philosophic attitude is a resolute attempt to enlarge the understanding of the scope of application of every notion which enters into our current thought."⁶ During and after World War II this same quality of comprehensiveness was emphasized by the armed forces as soldiers were encouraged to "see the big picture." There is a common-sense saying that we fail to see the forest because we are looking at the trees.

In order to think comprehensively we must resist the press of the immediate and the particular. We frequently find ourselves so snowed under with small though pressing problems that we never find the time to step back, so to speak, and view these

⁶ Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, Macmillan, New York, 1938, p. 234.