

Issues &
Alternatives
in

**Educational
Philosophy**



George R. Knight

2nd
Edition

**ISSUES AND
ALTERNATIVES**

IN

**EDUCATIONAL
PHILOSOPHY**

Second Edition

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Andrews University Press
Berrien Springs, Michigan

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1989, 1982

Andrews University Press

ISBN 0-943872-63-4

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 89-80748

Printing: 7 6

Year: 95

"An education that fails to consider the fundamental questions of human existence—the questions about the meaning of life and the nature of truth, goodness, beauty, and justice, with which philosophy is concerned—is a very inadequate type of education."

—Harold Titus

"At present, opinion is divided about the subjects of education. People do not take the same view about what should be learned by the young, either with a view to human excellence or a view to the best possible life; nor is it clear whether education should be directed mainly to the intellect or to moral character . . . [,] whether the proper studies to be pursued are those that are useful in life, or those which make for excellence, or those that advance the bounds of knowledge. . . . Men do not all honor the same distinctive human excellence and so naturally they differ about the proper training for it."

—Aristotle

*To my students in educational
philosophy; individuals whose
probings extended and refined
my thinking*

PREFACE

I*ssues and Alternatives in Educational Philosophy* is a survey of philosophies and philosophic issues that are relevant to the educational profession. It highlights the relationship between philosophic starting points and educational outcomes—between theory and practice. This short book makes no claim to comprehensive treatment of either educational or philosophical categories. It is a survey, and, as such, it does not seek to answer all the questions raised. On the contrary, many questions have been deliberately left unanswered or unexplained in the hope that such an approach might stimulate discussion and continuing thought about those questions. Thinking is an ongoing process, and one of the most beneficial results of the study of educational philosophy is obtained if students reach the place where they are unable to think of educational practices in isolation from the basic questions of life and meaning that give those practices significance.

This book has been developed with brevity, breadth of coverage, and clarity of presentation as goals. There is no lack of medium-sized and larger textbooks on educational philosophy available, but there is a dearth of short introductory texts. In addition, the existing brief treatments generally do not cover the full range of options. *Issues and Alternatives* has been developed to fill that gap. It is a brief survey text that is especially suited to fit the needs of undergraduate survey courses in educational philosophy, graduate students who need a quick review of the topic, and teachers of educational philosophy who want their students to spend maximum time in primary sources, while utilizing a wide-ranging survey text for orientation and overview.

Issues and Alternatives is divided into three sections. Part I deals with basic issues in philosophy and the relationship between philosophy and education. Part II is a survey of how traditional and modern philosophies have faced the basic philosophic issues, and the alternatives they have developed for educational practice. Part III discusses the need for developing a personal philosophy of education, some ways of building such a philosophy, and some of the challenges involved in implementing that philosophy.

The author is indebted to many people for his ideas. I would particularly like to express my gratitude to Joshua Weinstein for introducing me to the field of educational philosophy, and to my wife, Betty, who forced me to ask questions when I was already satisfied with the answers. The result of their influence on me has been growth and perseverance. Needless to say, I am also indebted to a host of writers, teachers, and speakers who have contributed to my education over the years. Many of the thoughts expressed in this volume have been gleaned from these sources. It should also be evident that originality is not a virtue (nor a goal) of a survey text—this is true of *Issues and Alternatives*.

George R. Knight
April 19, 1982

A Note on the Second Edition

The reception of the first edition of *Issues and Alternatives in Educational Philosophy* far exceeded its author's expectations. Its numerous printings and wide use have validated the helpfulness of the general approach taken. This second edition, therefore, makes no major changes in either structure or content. The changes revolve around updating (especially in relation to conservative reactions to the liberal educational theories of the 1960s and 1970s), clarifying, enriching, and editing the rough spots.

May 22, 1989

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THE NATURE OF PHILOSOPHY AND EDUCATION

1

Why Study Philosophy of Education?

Mindlessness¹ is the most pertinent and accurate criticism of American education in the twentieth century. There has been a great deal of activity in the field of educational innovation and experimentation, but most of it has not been adequately evaluated in terms of purpose, goals, and actual needs. Charles Silberman noted that education "has suffered too long from too many answers and too few questions."²

Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner have indicated that mindlessness in education is a natural outcome for a society which has traditionally been concerned with the "how" rather than the "why" of modern life. America has been making an unrelenting assault on technique for more than a century. As a nation, it has been busy creating new techniques for traveling, communicating, healing, cleaning, dying, and killing. The American people, however, have seldom asked whether or not they wanted the improvements, needed them, should have them, or whether they would come at too high a cost. The very word "progress" has come to be seen in terms of new methods. This

¹ Charles E. Silberman, *Crisis in the Classroom: The Remaking of American Education* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), p. 11.

² *Ibid.*, p. 470.

mentality, claim Postman and Weingartner, has been adopted by the educationalists of America who are busy creating new techniques for teaching spelling, new methods for teaching arithmetic to two-year-olds, new ways of keeping school halls quiet, and new modes for measuring intelligence. Educators have been so busy creating and implementing new methodology that they have often failed to ask such questions as whether two-year-old mathematicians are worth having.³

"Why all this education? To what purpose?"⁴ These are two of the most important questions that must be faced. Yet they are generally not seriously confronted. Educators have been concerned more with motion than progress, with means than ends. They have failed to ask the larger question of purpose; and the professional training of educators, with its emphasis on methodology, has largely set them up for this problem.

Columbia University's Lawrence Cremin met the issue squarely when he noted that

too few educational leaders in the United States are genuinely preoccupied with educational issues because they have no clear ideas about education. And if we look at the way these leaders have been recruited and trained, there is little that would lead us to expect otherwise. They have too often been managers, facilitators, politicians in the narrowest sense. They have been concerned with building buildings, balancing budgets, and pacifying parents, but they have not been prepared to spark a great public dialogue about the ends and means of education. And in the absence of such a dialogue, large segments of the public have had, at best, a limited understanding of the whys and wherefores of popular schooling.⁵

³ Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, *The School Book: For People Who Want to Know What All the Hollering Is About* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1973), pp. 295-97.

⁴ Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Genius of American Education* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), p. 30.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 111-12.

There is a strong need for the preparation of a new breed of professional educators who are able to focus on "thought about purpose" and "to think about what they are doing and why they are doing it."⁶ Certain educational thought leaders are calling for professional training that emphasizes studies in the humanities of education—those studies of the history, philosophy, and literature of education that will enable educators to develop a clear vision regarding the purpose of education and its relation to the meaning of life.

In the twentieth century, studies in the humanities of education have been neglected in the training of educational professionals because their immediate utility has been difficult to demonstrate. But, notes Cremin, "it is their ultimate utility that really matters."⁷ After all, it is not even possible to talk in terms of the utility of educational means unless individuals know what they desire as an end product and why they desire one particular end product above other possible outcomes. When a desired goal is in mind, then a person is in a position to think in terms of the relative value of the various methodologies that will aid in reaching that destination.

The task of educational philosophy is to bring future teachers, principals, superintendents, counselors, and curriculum specialists into face-to-face contact with the large questions underlying the meaning and purpose of life and education. To understand these questions, the student must wrestle with such issues as the nature of reality, the meaning and source of knowledge, and the structure of values. Educational philosophy must bring students into a position from which they can intelligently evaluate alternative ends, relate their aims to desired ends, and select pedagogical methods that harmonize with their aims. Thus a major task of educational philosophy is to help educators think meaningfully about the total educational and life process, so that they will be in a better position to develop a consistent and

⁶ Silberman, *Crisis in the Classroom*, p. 11.

⁷ Cremin, *The Genius of American Education*, p. 112.

comprehensive program that will assist their students in arriving at the desired goal.

In summary, the study of educational philosophy is (1) to help educators become acquainted with the basic problems of education, (2) to enable them to evaluate better the wide variety of suggestions offered as solutions to these problems, (3) to assist in clarifying thinking about the goals of both life and education, and (4) to guide in the development of an internally consistent point of view and a program that relates realistically to the larger world context.

What Is Philosophy?

Literally, the word "philosophy" means love of wisdom. It should be noted, however, that loving wisdom does not make one a philosopher. Philosophy, in its technical sense, might best be thought of in three aspects: an activity, a set of attitudes, and a body of content (see figure 1).⁸

Philosophy as an Activity

The activity aspect of philosophy is best seen by noting what philosophers do. Synthesizing, speculating, prescribing, and analyzing are four activities that have traditionally been at the center of philosophic endeavors.

The synthesizing role of the philosopher rests on mankind's desire and need to possess a comprehensive and consistent view of life that provides a basis upon which to unify thoughts, base aspirations, and interpret experiences. To most people, rational existence demands a world view that adds significance to individual actions by placing them in their wider context. In their role as synthesizers, philosophers seek to unite and integrate mankind's specialized knowledges into a unified view of the world.

⁸ Cf. Charles D. Marler, *Philosophy and Schooling* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1975), pp. 5-11; Philip G. Smith, *Philosophy of Education: Introductory Studies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 2-16.

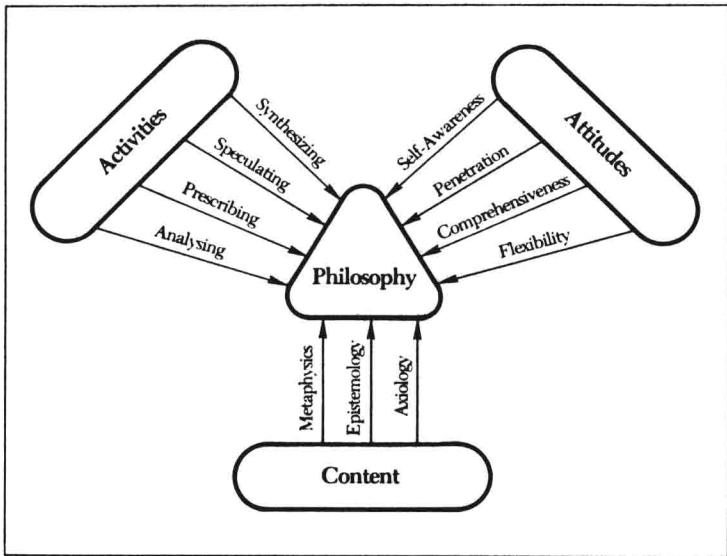


Figure 1
Aspects of Philosophy

The speculative dimension of philosophy is based upon the limitations of human knowledge. There is not enough scientifically verified data to provide a base for action. Furthermore, the most important aspects of human and universal existence are not amenable to scientific treatment. If daily activity is not to be paralyzed, it is necessary to move beyond what can be demonstrated empirically. It is the speculative function of philosophy that allows a rational jump from the known to the unknown, and which permits movement with a relative degree of confidence into the undefined. The alternative to speculation is to be stymied by doubt.

Prescription in philosophy seeks to establish standards for evaluating values in conduct and art. Prescriptions are usually expressed in terms of how people "ought" to act or react in a

given situation involving aesthetic judgments or moral alternatives. Intrinsic to prescribing is the task of defining what is meant by good, bad, right, wrong, beautiful, and ugly. The aim of prescriptive philosophy is to discover and illuminate principles for deciding what actions and qualities are most worthwhile. The alternative to prescription is to face every decision-making situation as if it were unique.

Analyzing in philosophy focuses on an examination of human language and our use of it in an attempt to clarify our understanding of problems and how they might be solved. In analysis the philosopher scrutinizes the use of logic in an argument and examines such words as "liberal," "good," "intelligence," and "motivation" in an attempt to evaluate their meanings in varying contexts. The analytic philosopher operates on the assumption that basic misunderstandings in regard to meanings might lie at the root of human problems.

In the twentieth century many philosophers have left the other activities of philosophy and made analysis their only function. This has led to a narrowness that has largely sterilized the discipline and robbed it of its meaning and relevance for the daily activities of social life. Meaningful and vital philosophy contains an interaction and balance of its four central activities.

Philosophy as an Attitude

Philosophers bring certain ways of thinking to their task. The characteristics of a person who is philosophic-minded may be listed as self-awareness, comprehensiveness, penetration, and flexibility.

Self-awareness entails a commitment to being as honest as possible with one's self in regard to personal biases, assumptions, and prejudices. No one is neutral, and one of the most difficult and elusive activities of human existence is to come to grips with our personal predispositions. It might be said that it is impossible even to begin to arrive at a correct perspective of the world until people realize the color of the glasses they are wearing. Once individuals become aware of the effect of their

personal predispositions, they need to take this information into account in both interpretation and communication.

Comprehensiveness involves an inclination toward collecting as much relevant data on a subject as possible from a wide spectrum of sources, rather than being satisfied with a narrow sample. This attitude is related to the synthesizing function of philosophy, in that it is interested in seeing the wholeness of phenomena rather than the parts.

Penetration is a desire that leads a person to go as deeply into a problem as skill, time, and energy allow. It is a squelching of the inclination toward the superficial in favor of a search for basic principles, issues, and solutions.

Flexibility might be thought of as the antithesis of rigidity or "psychological set." The attitude of flexibility is a form of sensitivity that enables one to be able to perceive old problems in new ways. It includes a willingness to restructure ideas in the face of sufficient evidence and the ability to envision viable alternatives to a viewpoint. Flexibility, however, should not be confused with indecisiveness or the inability to make a decision.⁹ After careful study, one may decide that a position is the most reasonable and then act in accord with that decision. "The point at issue lies in one's willingness—even readiness—to change that position given sufficient reason."¹⁰

Philosophy as Content

It has been noted that philosophy is, in part, an activity and an attitude. If people are involved in such activities as synthesis, speculation, prescription, and analysis; and if they possess the attitudes of self-awareness, comprehensiveness, penetration, and flexibility, then they soon will be confronted with some bedrock questions related to the nature of reality, truth, and value.

The content of philosophy is better seen in the light of questions than in the light of answers. It even can be said that

⁹ Smith, *Philosophy of Education*, p. 14.

¹⁰ Marler, *Philosophy and Schooling*, pp. 10-11.

philosophy is the study of questions. Van Cleve Morris has noted that the crux of the matter is asking the “right” questions. By “right” he means questions which are meaningful and relevant—the kind of questions people really want answered and which will make a difference in how they live and work.¹¹

There are three fundamental categories around which philosophical content has been organized: (1) *metaphysics*, the study of questions concerning the nature of reality; (2) *epistemology*, the study of the nature of truth and knowledge and how these are attained; and (3) *axiology*, the study of questions of value. A discussion of these three basic categories will form the subject matter of chapter II.

What Is Education?

“I am not going to get married until after I finish my education,” declared a young man to his friends. What did he mean by the term “education”? What was it that he hoped to complete before marriage? Was it education, learning, or schooling? Is there a conceptual difference among these words? If there is, one ought to come to grips with that difference and use the terms with precision. The following discussion will present some distinctions among these concepts and offer definitions¹² that will lead to a better understanding of these related but often confused processes.

In the above illustration the young man evidently meant that he would not get married until he was finished with school. Even though he used the term “education,” he was referring to schooling. Schooling might be thought of as attendance at an institution in which teachers and students operate in a prescribed manner. Schooling can be equated with formal education—that education which takes place in a school.

¹¹ Van Cleve Morris, *Philosophy and the American School* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), pp. 19-20.

¹² Each of these definitions is presented as a possible definition and not the definition of the respective term. As such, they may be helpful in stimulating thought and discussion concerning the differences and similarities inherent in these concepts.