

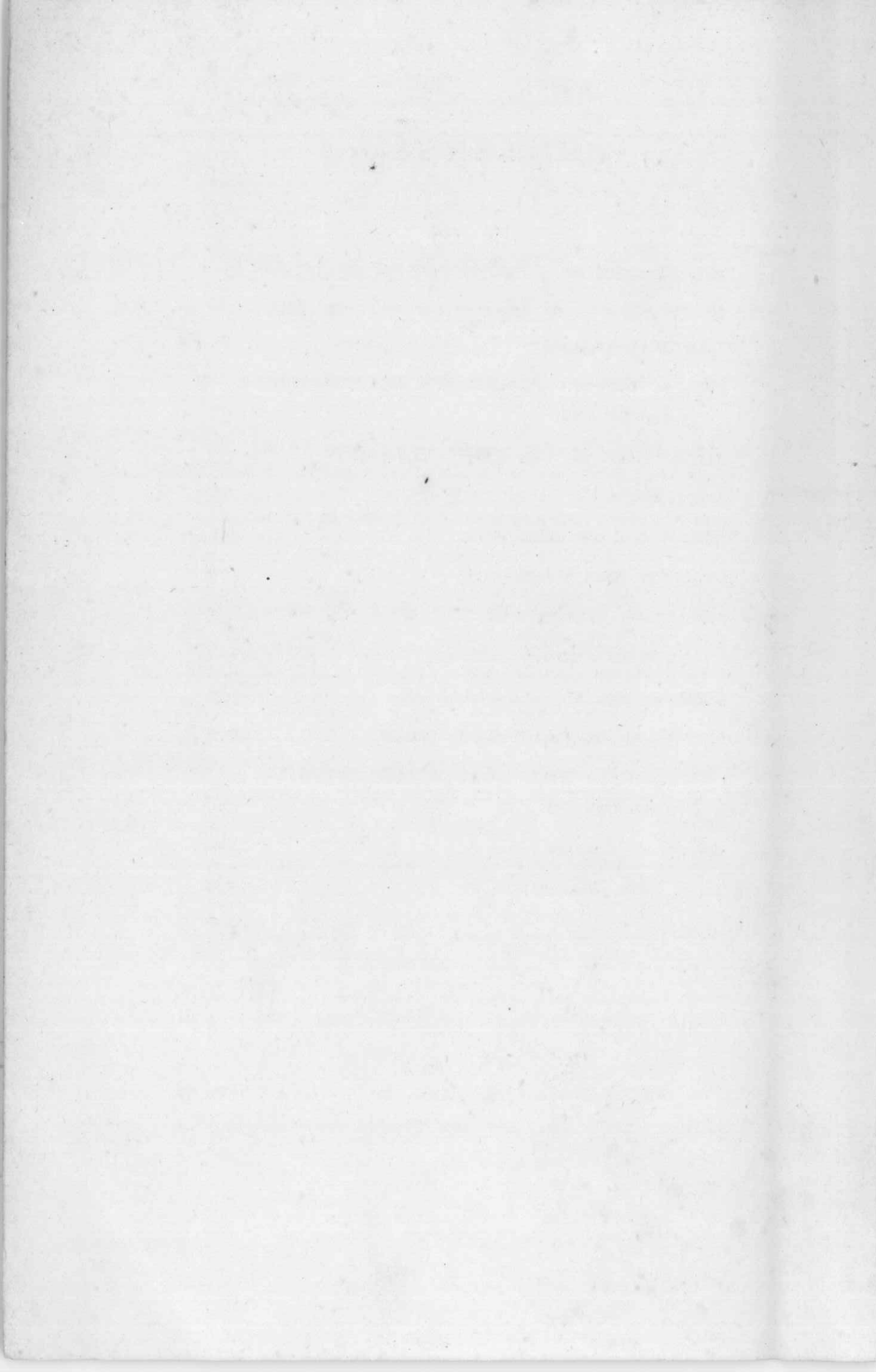
A MODERN PHILOSOPHY
OF
EDUCATION

By GODFREY H. THOMSON

*Bell Professor of Education at
University of Edinburgh*

LONDON
GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN LTD
MUSEUM STREET

A MODERN PHILOSOPHY
OF EDUCATION



BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Instinct, Intelligence, and Character

An Educational Psychology

SECOND IMPRESSION

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FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1929

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PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
UNWIN BROTHERS LTD., WOKING

PREFACE

THE writing of this book, begun on an island holiday on Martha's Vineyard in the New World, and completed four years later on another island holiday on the Ultima Thule of the Old, has occupied a period of my life when circumstances have caused a rapid widening of my views on education. At its commencement I was Visiting Professor of Education in the department of educational psychology of Teachers' College, Columbia University, New York City. From there I returned to resume charge of the Education Department of Armstrong College, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England. And after a year I was transferred to the chair of Education in the University of Edinburgh, originally endowed by legacies of Dr. Andrew Bell of monitorial memory, with which is now combined the post of Director of the Edinburgh Provincial College for the Training of Teachers. The rapid changes from England to America, back to England and then to Scotland, were well calculated to shake up any preconceived notions I might have possessed, and those which have survived the oscillation may, I suppose, be presumed to have a certain fixity of tenure in my mind. Meanwhile, I have renewed an acquaintance (which dates from 1901) with German education, where a revolution as great as can well be imagined has taken place. The chief impression left on my mind by the experiences of these four years is only a deepening of a former conviction, that one-half of the world does not know how the other half lives, and that when anyone is quite certain he has found truth it is proportionally certain that he is only

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narrow-minded, as most of us are. Everyone sees the truth through his own special spectacles: and it is imperative that each should recognize that fact, and try on other pairs now and then. He will find that he and his neighbour see by polarized light, darkness to one being light to the other, and will perhaps recognize that to temper one view with a tincture of the other may give a more solid, a stereoscopic, picture of what might be.

GODFREY THOMSON

SHETLAND,

September 1928

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A MODERN PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

CHAPTER I

THE MEANING OF A PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

"I am sorry, then, I have pretended to be a philosopher."

HUME

"No wind makes for him that hath no intended port to sail unto."

MONTAIGNE

I HAVE ventured to call this book an educational philosophy. I do so in no presumptuous manner, and do not even pretend to be a philosopher in the technical sense. I only use the word to indicate that I wish to look at education as a whole, and try to make as consistent and sensible an idea of that whole as I can.

Philosophy means looking at the whole of a question, without restrictions or simplifications; looking at ends and purposes, not merely at methods and means, and scrutinizing the latter in the light of the former. It implies a scepticism of much that the popular mind accepts as unquestioned, and a delay of judgment until the whole matter has been thought out. It demands an effort after self-consistency, and it will have nothing to do with compromise.

True, a practical working philosophy may have to accept compromises; may have to set aside scepticism and

act as though this or that were certain; may have to renounce generalization and take as its aim separate "goods" which it cannot reconcile. But in so far as it does these things philosophy becomes a creed rather than a discussion. Indeed, this book has grown out of a series of notes and writings which I looked upon as my educational creed, and thought of publishing under that title. But, on further consideration, creed seemed hardly the word for a balance of opinions, which were yearly in a state of flux, in the mind of one who is philosophically agnostic.

It may be a consolation to some intending reader to be assured that no special study of the subtleties of philosophy is required of him. Everyone, however, in his ordinary reading, or even, if he be no great reader, in the course of his ordinary life, comes to form some notion of the meaning of terms such as utilitarianism or pragmatism; chooses in some measure between idealism or materialism, between a realm of ends or a universe of determinism; and takes an interest at times in the nature of the self, in the possibility of interaction between mind and matter, or in the real nature of time and space. At any rate, every teacher who is not merely holding his nose to the grindstone should at least occasionally do so.

In the training of a teacher, on the theoretical side, there can be distinguished the study of psychology, of method, of the history of education in the past, of its organization and administration in the present, and, as I think, the study of its philosophy. The latter gives a meaning to all the others. The teacher does not study psychology as a psychologist, or the history of education

as a historian. He studies them as means to an end. He may, it is true, become a psychologist or a historian in that deeper sense and study those subjects entirely for their own sakes. Indeed, unless he does so at times, and in some measure, he will probably not benefit by them: and they will certainly not advance if they are studied by all their devotees merely as means to an end, any more than would chemistry or mathematics, where notoriously the best way to kill progress is to demand results. Yet *as teacher* he studies them as means, for his aim is to learn how to educate.

From history, from psychology, from a study of actual methods, however, the student will arrive at somewhat conflicting notions of how to educate. The comparison and discussion of these conflicting notions is part of the philosophy of education as I understand it. From the same sources, and still more from his general experience of life—political, social, and religious—he will form ideas as to why he is going to educate children. To bring these ideas to clear expression, to confront opposed theories one to another, to make a reasoned choice between them—that, too, is part of the philosophy of education.

A philosophy of education must know something of biology and heredity, for education is a device which has a place in the process of evolution, and has enormously influenced evolution. It must know something of sociology and history, for the problem of education has depended in a very fundamental way on the mode of life of the people, on their manners, the density of the population, the nature of their arts and crafts, the form of transport in vogue. It must, implicitly or explicitly, take up some

position with regard to religion, though it need not and should not be associated with any particular creed. And it has to decide on the influence it will allow to political beliefs.

Probably the deepest question it has to answer is whether we educate mainly for this world or for the next. Possibly some might hold it still more fundamental to ask whether education is preparation for anything, or only a process which is its own end: but those who do appear to put this question (as does John Dewey) are, I think, only asking whether the best way to ensure successful preparation for some later and as yet undetermined period is not to forget that we are preparing, and live as completely as possible the present life, according to ideals which are made for it, and not for that future. That at least would be my own position with regard to education as preparation for a hereafter. The best preparation for a hereafter would surely be the best preparation for this life, for living this life in the best possible way. All turns, of course, on what we mean by *best*, and part of our deliberations, therefore, will necessarily concern that main problem of all philosophy, What is the highest good? to which all other objects are subsidiary, and only means to that final end. That is a problem which has exercised the greatest minds of all ages without definite solution, and we cannot, therefore, expect to solve it. But it is surely necessary to give it consideration, since our actions will be guided by some working hypothesis of the highest good, either consciously or unconsciously.

It is, I think, particularly on the sociological side that the theory of education needs extension, and will receive

extension, during the next two decades. Education is concerned with the problem of the individual and society, is, indeed, by some defined as the process of fitting the individual to take his place in society. It must, therefore, be interested in those studies which are of the individual, on the one hand, or of society, on the other—psychology and sociology. Now psychology has always been to some extent studied by teachers, and during the present century has improved education especially by making the actual individual, and not an average or a typical individual, the object of the teacher's and the administrator's care. But I am not aware that sociology has received equal attention from educators, and it appears to me desirable, without detracting from the value of psychology for teachers in training, to emphasize the equal necessity of some study of the laws of society, and the philosophical problems connected therewith. To me, the main problems of society present themselves as problems of population, survival, and selection, including migration, and I have a profound conviction that education must be closely concerned with these questions.

More definite and more immediately practical are the questions of interconnection between school and the requirements of business and industry. They have formed the object of inquiry for a number of committees, parliamentary and otherwise, during the last few years, and the conclusions of these committees are likely to have a lasting influence on the development of the educational system. Teachers' officials, workmen, employers, social workers, voluntary organizations, have all given evidence before these committees, and share in the credit for the

attempt at co-operation and in the responsibility for urging forward and carrying out the more immediately practicable recommendations. Perhaps the greatest responsibility rests on members of education authorities, of whom, though some, of course, are narrow-minded and comparatively ignorant of the educational methods of other times and places, and some definitely pledged to policies which have little of the educational about them, a large majority are well-intentioned and a number broadminded, well-informed, and unprejudiced, more so than many professionally engaged in teaching or administration. Such people, in my experience, tend to see the educational problem primarily as a sociological one, not a psychological one, and least of all as a teaching problem.

Although population questions are obviously within the province of the sociologists, and population questions are genetic and biological in their appeal to most scientists, yet the professional sociologist is not, so far as I have observed, genetically or biologically minded as a rule. There is, indeed, considerable difference of opinion between the geneticist and the psychologist, on the one hand, and the sociologist, on the other, concerning the nature versus nurture problem, to which two chapters of this book are devoted. Both sides no doubt will take refuge in saying that both nature and nurture are important, and inconceivable apart. But there is a real problem in spite of this truth, for the methods of curing certain social evils will differ according as one grants to the environment more or less power to change—if not permanently, at least in the present individual—the inherited qualities.