



SECOND EDITION

INTRODUCTION
TO THE
PHILOSOPHY
OF
EDUCATION

GEORGE F. KNELLER

INTRODUCTION TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Second Edition

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Preface

Although much has been written in the past few years on the proper nature of educational philosophy, I have not been convinced of a need to change my own point of view. Briefly, I consider educational philosophy, like social and political philosophy, to be a branch of formal philosophy, modified, as I illustrate in this book, by ideas emerging from all realms of the educational enterprise. I also adopt the systematic (in contrast to the analytic) approach. Whereas the analyst breaks concepts down, and I do some of this myself, I prefer to put them back together again. I value the work of the analyst and consider it indispensable, but I value synthesis more highly, believing it to be the ultimate ideal, especially in an age of almost rampant specialization.

In this second edition, I lay greater stress on matters of knowledge and value and somewhat lesser stress on the formal categories of philosophy. I do so largely in response to the increased attention now being paid to problems of personal as well as cognitive knowledge and to the human as well as

academic value of what is learned. Reflecting a heightened interest everywhere in new modes of philosophizing, I assign separate chapters to existentialism and analysis. I have enriched the content of the former by drawing upon the writings of existentialists themselves, but only in those relatively few instances where they reflect upon education in existential fashion. The new chapter on analysis moves away from a concentration on logical empiricism into applications of logic, language, and analysis. Here I have added two short analyses of my own—on “equality” and on “teaching.”

As in the case of the first edition, this work is a compilation of chapters written originally for a text I edited entitled *Foundations of Education* (Wiley, 1971). My purpose remains the same: to provide institutions of teacher education with a book that will summarize the subject within the time normally available. Although the study of educational philosophy has become more widespread during the past decade, America's colleges and universities on the whole still lag behind their European counterparts in emphasizing the profound contribution that philosophy can make toward an understanding of education. I hope that this book will in some small way help to remedy the situation.

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The Relevance of Philosophy

From time to time every teacher and student asks himself questions that are implicitly philosophical. The teacher wonders, "Why am I teaching? Why am I teaching history? What is teaching at its best?" And the student asks, "Why am I studying algebra? What am I going to school for anyway?" Taken far enough, these questions become philosophical. They become questions about the nature of man and the world, about knowledge, value, and the good life.

MODES OF PHILOSOPHY

Unfortunately, nothing illuminating can be said about philosophy with a single definition. Let us therefore think of philosophy as an activity in three modes or styles: the speculative, the prescriptive, and the analytic.

Speculative Philosophy. Speculative philosophy is a way of thinking systematically about everything that exists. Why do philosophers want to do this? Why are they not content, like scientists, to study particular aspects of reality? The answer is that the human mind wishes to see things as a whole. It wishes to understand how all the different things that have been discovered together form some sort of meaningful totality. We are all aware of this tendency in ourselves. When we read a book, look at a painting, or study an assignment, we are concerned not only with particular details but also with the order or pattern that gives these details their significance. Speculative philosophy, then, is a search for order and wholeness, applied not to particular items or experiences but to all knowledge and all experience. In brief, speculative philosophy is the attempt to find a coherence in the whole realm of thought and experience.

Prescriptive Philosophy. Prescriptive philosophy seeks to establish standards for assessing values, judging conduct, and appraising art. It examines what we mean by good and bad, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly. It asks whether these qualities inhere in things themselves or whether they are projections of our own minds. To the experimental psychologist the varieties of human conduct are morally neither good nor bad; they are simply forms of behavior to be studied empirically. But to the educator and the prescriptive philosopher some forms of behavior are worthwhile and others are not. The prescriptive philosopher seeks to discover and to recommend principles for deciding what actions and qualities are most worthwhile and why they should be so.

Analytic Philosophy. Analytic philosophy focuses on words and meaning. The analytic philosopher examines such notions as "cause," "mind," "academic freedom," and "equality of opportunity" in order to assess the different meanings they carry in different contexts. He shows how inconsistencies may arise when meanings appropriate in certain contexts are imported into others. The analytic philosopher tends to be skeptical, cautious, and disinclined to build systems of thought.

Today the analytic approach dominates American and British philosophy. On the Continent the speculative tradition prevails. But whichever approach is uppermost at any time, most philosophers agree that all approaches contribute to the health of philosophy. Speculation unaccompanied by analysis soars too easily into a heaven of its own, irrelevant to the world as we know it; analysis without speculation descends to minutiae and becomes sterile. In any case few philosophers are solely speculative, solely prescriptive, or solely analytic. Speculation, prescription, and analysis are all present to some degree in the work of all mature philosophers.

PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE

A great deal of information has been gathered by various sciences on subjects treated by philosophy, particularly human nature. But when we look at this information, we find that psychology gives us one picture of man, sociology another, biology another, and so on. What we have after all the sciences have been searched is not a composite picture of man but a series of different pictures. These pictures fail to satisfy because they explain different aspects of man rather than man as a whole. Can we unify our partial pictures of man into one that is single and complete? Yes, but not by using scientific methods alone. It is through philosophy that we unify the separate findings of science and interrelate the fundamental concepts these findings presuppose.

The philosopher considers questions that arise before and after the scientist has done his work. Traditional science presupposes, for example, that every event is caused by other events and in turn causes still other events. Hence, for science no event is uncaused. But how can we be sure of this? Do cause and effect exist in the world itself or are they read into the world by men? These questions cannot be answered scientifically because causality is not a finding but an assumption of science. Unless the scientist assumes that reality is causal in nature, he cannot begin to investigate it. Again, science deals

with things as they appear to our senses and to our instruments. But are things in themselves really the same as they appear to us? The scientist cannot say, because things in themselves, as opposed to their appearances, are by definition beyond empirical verification.

Philosophy, then, is both natural and necessary to man. We are forever seeking some comprehensive framework within which our separate findings may be given a total significance. Not only is philosophy a branch of knowledge along with art, science, and history, but also it actually embraces these disciplines in their theoretical reaches and seeks to establish connections between them. Once again, *philosophy attempts to establish a coherence throughout the whole domain of experience.*

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Beside having its own concerns, philosophy considers the fundamental assumptions of other branches of knowledge. When philosophy turns its attention to science, we have philosophy of science; when it examines the basic concepts of the law, we have philosophy of law; and when it deals with education, we have philosophy of education or educational philosophy.

Just as formal philosophy attempts to understand reality as a whole by explaining it in the most general and systematic way, so educational philosophy seeks to comprehend education in its entirety, interpreting it by means of general concepts that will guide our choice of educational ends and policies. In the same way that general philosophy coordinates the findings of the different sciences, educational philosophy interprets these findings as they bear on education. Scientific theories do not carry direct educational implications; they cannot be applied to educational practice without first being examined philosophically.

Educational philosophy depends on general or formal philosophy to the extent that the problems of education are of a

general philosophical character. We cannot criticize existing educational policies or suggest new ones without considering such general philosophic problems as (a) the nature of the good life, to which education should lead; (b) the nature of man himself, because it is man we are educating; (c) the nature of society, because education is a social process; and (d) the nature of ultimate reality, which all knowledge seeks to penetrate. Educational philosophy, then, involves among other things the application of formal philosophy to the field of education.

Like general philosophy, educational philosophy is speculative, prescriptive, and analytic. It is speculative when it seeks to establish theories of the learner, the teacher, and the school by which to order and interpret the conflicting data of educational research and the behavioral sciences. It is prescriptive when it specifies the ends that education ought to follow and the general means it should use to attain them. It is analytic when it clarifies speculative and prescriptive statements. The analyst, as we shall see, examines the rationality of our educational ideas, their consistency with other ideas, and the ways in which they are distorted by loose thinking. He tests the logic of our concepts and their adequacy to the facts they seek to explain. Above all, he attempts to clarify the many different meanings that have been attached to such heavily worked educational terms as "freedom," "adjustment," "growth," "experience," "needs," and "knowledge."

We are now ready to consider the various branches of philosophy, particularly metaphysics, as they relate to education.

THE NATURE OF REALITY

Metaphysics is mainly the province of speculative philosophy. Its central concern is the nature of ultimate reality. Metaphysics seeks to answer such questions as these: Does the universe have a rational design or is it ultimately meaningless?

¹ Educational philosophy derives also from the experiences of education. See Chapter 3, "Contemporary Educational Theories."

Is what we call mind a reality of its own or merely a form of matter in motion? Is the behavior of all organisms causally determined, or do some organisms, such as men, possess a measure of freedom?

With the rise of science many people believed metaphysics to be outmoded. Scientific findings seemed trustworthy because they could be measured, whereas metaphysical notions seemed to be unverifiable and to have no practical application. Today, however, we recognize that metaphysics and science are two different activities, each valuable in its own right. Both seek to make general statements, but metaphysics deals with concepts whose instances cannot be measured, such as "reality," "change," "self," and "spirit." This does not mean that metaphysicians disregard science. On the contrary, science itself often gives rise to problems about the nature of reality that metaphysicians seek to resolve.

Science also rests on metaphysical assumptions. Many people do not realize this fact. In his *Adventure of Ideas* Alfred North Whitehead writes, "No science can be more secure than the unconscious metaphysics which tacitly it presupposes." The nuclear physicist Max Planck agrees:

"the scientific world picture gained by experience . . . remains always a mere approximation, a more or less well defined model. As there is a material object behind every sensation, so there is a metaphysical reality behind everything that human experience shows to be real"²

Many of our greatest scientists, notably Albert Einstein, have felt compelled to formulate metaphysical conceptions *in consequence* of their scientific discoveries.

² Max Planck, "The Meaning and Limits of Exact Science," *Science* (1949), 319-327. Cf. Everett W. Hall, "Metaphysics," in Dagobert D. Runes, Ed., *Living Schools of Philosophy*, Littlefield, Adams, Ames, Iowa, 1956, p. 130: "Metaphysics affects action not by giving control over nature, not by offering physical devices which can be used for various purposes, but by shaping views as to what nature is and how it can and ought to be controlled, by indicating appropriate ends. It does so through a theory of ethics, based in a theory of values which, in turn, is based in a set of views concerning the nature of existence and of knowledge."

Certain philosophers, it is true, regard metaphysics as superfluous. They confine their attention to logic and the theory of knowledge. This position is defensible, but it is not widely held. Most philosophers maintain that theories of logic and knowledge inevitably are derived from metaphysical assumptions. There is, says Bertrand Russell, a "concealed metaphysic, usually unconscious in every writer on philosophy. Even if his subject is metaphysics, he is almost certain to have an uncritically believed system which underlies his explicit arguments"³

In recent years metaphysics has regained much of its former standing. Science no doubt has brought great material progress, but even if all man's material wants were satisfied, he would not be completely at home in the world. By nature man is a metaphysical being, possessed by a desire to draw from the diverse realms of public knowledge and private experience some understanding of the *ultimate* nature of things.

METAPHYSICS AND EDUCATION

In educational theory and practice metaphysics generates discussions of questions that lack scientific answers. For example, the metaphysical question whether human life has any purpose and, if so, what, is implicit in any study of biological evolution. If a student concludes from his study of evolution that the universe has no purpose, he may conclude that his life has meaning only as he personally puts meaning into it. In this case he must ask himself what goals in life he should pursue. Taking a metaphysical position will help him answer such questions.

Again, take the problem of the nature of mind. Teachers often say, "If Johnnie kept his mind on his work, he would have no trouble at all in school." But what does the teacher mean here by "mind"? Is the mind different from the body? How are the two related? Is the mind the actual source of thoughts? Perhaps what we call "mind" is not an entity at

³ Bertrand Russell, "Dewey's New Logic," in Paul Schilpp, Ed., *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Ill., 1939, p. 138.

all. Physiological and psychological studies of the brain have given us factual information and cyberneticians have compared the mind (or brain) to a computer. But such comparisons are crude; they do not satisfy our concern about the ultimate nature of the mind. Here again, knowing metaphysics and being able to think metaphysically help the teacher when he is considering questions of ultimate meaning.

All teachers entertain notions about the nature of reality. They have views, however vague, about the nature of the universe, the destiny of man, the natural and the supernatural, permanence and change, and the ultimate purpose of things—matters that have concerned metaphysicians throughout the ages. Nothing, in fact, contributes more to continuous, patient, and careful reflection than the treatment of an educational problem in its metaphysical dimensions.

The number of metaphysical ideas is legion. For our purposes, however, they can be grouped according to certain “schools” of philosophic thought. The main schools, each with many subdivisions, are “idealism,” “realism,” and “pragmatism.” If we consider what these schools have to say about the nature of reality and its relation to education, we shall be able to think more clearly about the question ourselves.

Before beginning our presentation, one word of caution: we are grouping philosophies into schools of thought for purposes of convenience, for ease of understanding. Philosophers also have to be studied separately and in their own right. Locke and Kant, for example, created systems that solved traditional philosophic problems afresh. Rousseau and Nietzsche were even more individualistic. And although both Kierkegaard and Sartre are existentialists, they differ in their views as much as they agree. After the student has studied philosophers in schools, he should go on to study them as individual thinkers.

IDEALIST METAPHYSICS AND EDUCATION

The philosophic idealist claims that ultimate reality is spiritual in nature rather than physical, mental rather than material.