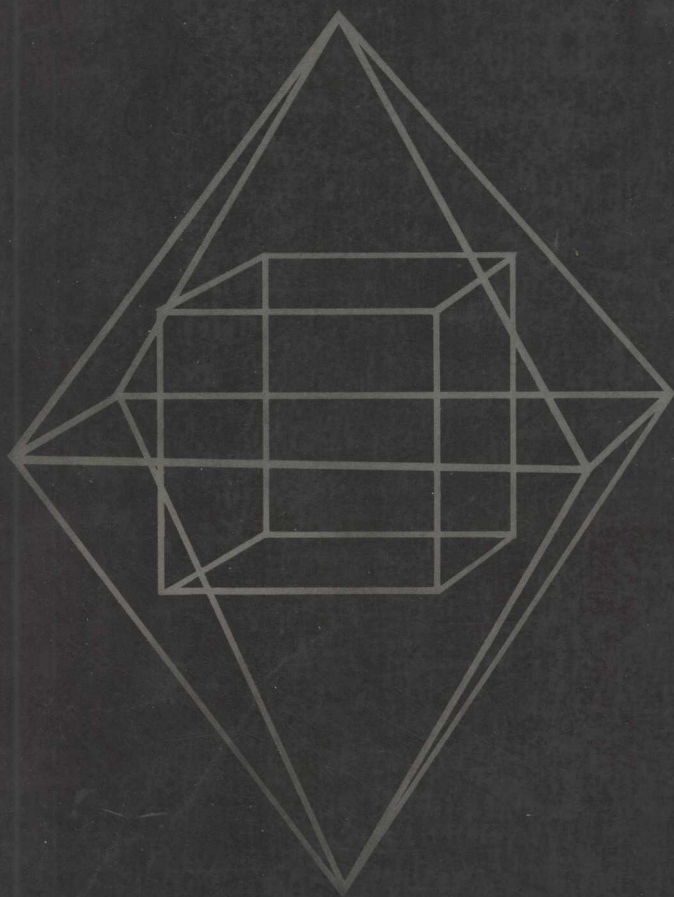


# An Introduction to PHILOSOPHY of EDUCATION

Second Edition



Robin Barrow Ronald Woods

*Robin Barrow & Ronald Woods*

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**An Introduction to Philosophy  
of Education**

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# An Introduction to Philosophy of Education

## *Preface to Second Edition*

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The invitation from our publishers to update and revise our *Introduction to Philosophy of Education* gives rise to the question of the nature of philosophy, for it is not the kind of subject that dates in the way that physics or even history may do. There are revolutionary thinkers in philosophy who open up entirely new paths of inquiry, but they are exceedingly rare, and even they do not often falsify the past so much as move away from it. Philosophy is less about generating knowledge of new matters than about providing greater understanding of what we are already familiar with. Seldom are there new discoveries or new interpretations that make previous work in the field unacceptable. What, for example, Plato had to say about love or justice over two thousand years ago has not been invalidated, replaced or rendered obsolete by the work of, say, Wittgenstein in this century. Plato's writings really do have as much pertinence today to the questions with which they are concerned as any contemporary work, in a way that the writings of early Greek doctors or scientists, for all their intrinsic interest, do not. There can of course be specific criticism in philosophy that shows arguments thought to have been sound to be untenable, but that kind of shift of view scarcely applies at the level of an introductory text.

Our initial aim was to provide an introduction to the business

of philosophizing in the context of educational problems; in line with that aim we concentrated on pursuing an examination of the main concepts in the domain of education (or, as I should now prefer to say, schooling, since I take education to be merely one of many possible concerns of school, although most of the topics treated here are to do with the more specific concept of education). The intention was to conduct a rigorous investigation of the ideas of education, knowledge, culture, etc., so that a fuller picture of them and a greater awareness of the implications of each concept would emerge, or sometimes, so that the inadequacy of an idea or slogan might be exposed. In so far as what we originally wrote was to the point and coherent, the passing of time – at any rate, so brief a period of time – does not much affect it. If there was the logical possibility of distinguishing between influence generally and indoctrination specifically five years ago, there will be still. If our conception of education involved knowledge and understanding then, it does now in all probability. If the creativity of a Beethoven was distinct from the self-expression of a young child last year, there will be good reason to maintain that distinction this year. So, in design and broad outline this edition retains the format and flavour of the first, not because we are complacent, but because material changes in the world do not often affect conceptual truths and points of logic.

None the less some changes have been made. First, there are a number of small but not insignificant stylistic alterations; and a number of grammatical infelicities have been corrected. Allusions and references have in many places been brought up to date: nothing dates quite as obviously as the name of a defunct pop group or a forgotten political event. Examples, too, have sometimes been brought up to date, although here again it must be remembered that the function of examples in philosophy is very often such that neither their being up to date nor their practical likelihood matters very much. For instance, when a philosopher considers whether a historian who knows nothing other than history should be considered as educated, he is not interested in the likelihood of there actually being such a person, but in whether, *if* there was, he would count as educated. He is interested in what might intelligibly be conceived, more than in what

happens to be the case in the physical world. It is important to realize at the outset that examples are used for the purpose of testing logical possibilities rather than actual probabilities in order to avoid the mistake of assuming that philosophers are out of touch with the everyday world. When we ask whether a person could be in two places at the same time, we are not questioning the possibility of a physical body such as yours or mine being entirely in Oxford while also being entirely in Cambridge; rather we are raising the question of the senses in which a person might conceivably be said to be in two places at the same time. (Suppose your body minus your heart is in Oxford, but your heart is keeping another body alive in Cambridge.) In other words we are really raising the question of what constitutes being a person, and not asking about material factors in the everyday world at all. When we ask whether an individual could be considered creative if he were to spill paint accidentally onto canvas in such a way as to produce a beautiful pattern, we are not concerned with whether anyone has done or might do such a thing, but with throwing light on what is involved in the notion of being creative. (Again, if someone did that, would we classify it as a creative act?) Likewise, nobody that I know of would behave in some of the ways used as examples in the chapter on rationality in this book, but to consider examples, however bizarre, allows us to fill in the details of, or to question, our conceptions. (Incidentally, one reference that I have not bothered to update is that made to the launching of the first Sputniks. It is true that some readers may not have heard of Sputniks, but in terms of technological breakthrough, which is the point of the reference, some of the early steps in the space race represent more significant achievements than later, more dramatic steps. For that reason the example does not need bringing up to date, and for that reason younger readers ought to be presented with it.)

Once or twice changes in our own thinking brought about by thought and discussion and with the passing of time have necessitated alterations to the substance of an argument. Or issues to which we were not previously alert, such as the widespread immoral treatment of animals, have impinged on our consciences and required a mention. However, such changes in

substantive content are not extensive, if only because, while the original text was the work of two of us, this revision has been solely my responsibility.

The main weakness of the original edition, in my view, was that we did not draw a very clear distinction between words and concepts or between verbal and conceptual analysis. More simply, we did not, perhaps, make it entirely clear what we took philosophical analysis to involve. In particular, we made a number of references to 'linguistic usage' and to 'objectivity' and 'correctness', without making it clear to what extent linguistic usage *determines* conceptual meaning (as opposed to reflects it, coincides with it, influences it, etc.), and without explaining in what senses of the words an analysis can be said to be 'objective' and/or 'correct'. On this broad but vitally important matter of methodology Woods and I have, we think, slightly different views although we have never satisfactorily resolved wherein the difference lies. This may partially explain the slight vagueness, not to say odd sign of tension, about our procedure in the previous edition.

I have argued extensively elsewhere that although there are a number of very important questions to be asked about verbal matters (the features and functions of words and our use of them), it is important to distinguish them from conceptual questions.<sup>1</sup> Questions about linguistic usage may lead to illuminating answers of direct relevance to conceptual issues, and should therefore be asked by philosophers. But none the less they are distinct from questions about concepts as such, and should therefore not be the philosopher's only interest. As words and concepts are not identical, so linguistic analysis cannot be co-extensive with conceptual analysis. We may ask how people tend to use the word 'educated' and that will certainly throw light upon what is generally involved in being educated, at any rate as conceived by our culture. We may find that all people use the term in exactly the same way, or we may find that, despite variations, there is a common core to all uses of the word. Consequently we might, if we chose, talk of a

<sup>1</sup> See in particular my *The Philosophy of Schooling* and 'Five Commandments for the Eighties' in *Educational Analysis*, 1982, vol. 4, no. 1, ed. Robin Barrow.

philosophy here practised is just one more class-based act of special pleading. Should not these and other similar tides of thought be reflected in some way in a new edition? The simple answer is, no. The various movements, ideologies and methodological critiques that come and go are attempts to interpret the world in one particular way. They are therefore to be contrasted with, rather than opposed to, a book such as this which does not seek to explain the whole field of education, let alone the world or human experience, but to contribute to a greater understanding of some ideas and arguments related to education.

Of course some work in other fields does suggest criticism of our methodology. Some, for instance, have argued, though quite unconvincingly, that knowledge is a *purely* social construct, and that our attempt to be detached and objective is necessarily but one more socially determined pose. Others, more reasonably, have made points to the effect that our procedure is in various ways less value neutral than we might wish. These latter kinds of criticism, involving argument directly related to certain practices or assumptions, are fair comment and, in so far as they are convincingly argued, to be taken note of. But a general sociological thesis, presented without reference to the arguments of particular philosophers, to the effect that the would-be autonomous and independent minded philosopher is actually inevitably the product of his social environment, no more requires a philosophical rejoinder or the abandonment of philosophical practice, than a Freudian account of why an individual seeks love in the ways he does obliges the lover to start loving in a new way. It is, incidentally, most unfortunate that, given this quite common tendency to fail to see the difference between sociological attempts to explain, psychological types of explanation, philosophical inquiry and historical accounts of events, and the consequent tendency to believe any one of them to be more significant than it is, we have for the most part failed to institutionalize the study of at least these four subjects as crucial to the study of education. Had we done so with more success there might be fewer people around who believe that to explain why somebody believes something in sociological terms, is to dispense with the question of whether the belief is reasonable. (At the University of Leicester, while preaching the importance

of the disciplines, we have in fact moved from requiring students to study all four ten years ago, through a period of requiring that they study only one, to a state in which they study two. This is to be welcomed, I suppose, on the grounds that half a loaf is better than none. But the adage is misleading. When the point of the exercise is to develop in people a capacity to recognize logically different aspects of a matter, giving people awareness of only half the possibilities is more like giving them half a sixpence than half a loaf.)

It was, then, never the purpose of philosophy (our conception of it, that is) or a book such as this to offer to interpret the world. Its aim was, and remains, 'to attempt to show philosophy in action' with 'the stress on how to do philosophy'. For this reason it is of secondary importance what particular concepts and arguments are focused upon. We might have elected to add chapters on topical themes, but to have done so would only have been to reduplicate work done elsewhere. As to the original issues we chose to discuss, it is difficult to see how a philosopher of education could not but throw out at least passing reference to education, understanding and knowledge, and we still believe that rationality, culture, creativity, indoctrination, and the notions of readiness, discovery, needs and wants (collected together in the chapter on child-centred education), deserve to be carefully considered by any prospective teacher.

The notes for further reading have been brought up to date and there is now in addition a comprehensive bibliography of worthwhile writing in the field.

Robin Barrow  
University of Leicester  
1982

correct or objective sense of the word 'educated' (i.e. the sense of the word sanctioned by usage in our culture). But such linguistic exercises, though they may in some cases incidentally reveal all that there is to be said about the concept behind the word (the idea behind the label), do not necessarily do so, and in fact are less likely to do so in proportion to the complexity and sophistication of the idea in question. Two problems, at least, may very likely remain – problems that need tackling and which very obviously belong to the domain of philosophy: people may use a word in widely different ways, sometimes to the point at which there does not appear to be even a common core, and people's use of a term may fail to reveal a clear and coherent conception on its own terms. Thus 'educated' might conceivably mean something quite different for two people (in which case we are dealing with distinct concepts labelled with the same word), and anybody's notion of being educated, including one's own, might just be insufficiently clarified and worked out. I should be strongly inclined to conclude that talk of a correct or objective concept is therefore meaningless, unless one merely means a widely shared concept. One may reasonably ask whether my use of the word 'educated' is correct according to standard practice in my culture, but the question to ask about my concept of being educated is how well formulated or articulated it is.

The task of the philosopher, having taken what hints and clues he can from linguistic patterns, is to arrive at a set of clear, coherent and specific concepts. We need to clarify our concepts in order to assess them; until we painstakingly spell out what we understand by being educated we can say nothing about it, and obviously our unpacking must lead to a clear exposition, so we know that we are saying something and what it is. Coherence is necessary, both within and between concepts, so that our ideas make sense and can stand up: we do not want a conception of being educated that when clearly articulated turns out to be self-contradictory or to carry with it implications that we cannot for one reason or another accept. Specificity is necessary in order to facilitate talk with teeth in it. That is to say, in order to be able to make telling comments on the world, in order to gain a fuller understanding, one needs to develop an armoury of specific as opposed to general concepts. The ability to discriminate between

the various species of a genus, in any field, rather than to see the world only in terms of genera, represents power when it comes to knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

In line with the distinction referred to between words and concepts, the device of using quotation marks round single words or phrases, rather overworked in the first edition and not adopted consistently, has here been systematized. When the word is being referred to, quotation marks are used; when the concept is being referred to, they are not used. Thus we discuss the logical features of knowledge, but the emotive force of the word 'knowledge'. Occasionally quotation marks are also used as 'sneer quotes' to suggest an ironic or otherwise not quite literal use of a word or phrase.

Another change I considered was that of replacing the generic use of the word 'he' (to mean 'a person') by 'she' or by some newly coined neutral term. But I rejected this in the end on the grounds that correct English provides us with the word 'he' meaning 'a person of either sex', and it would be more appropriate for the few who do not appreciate this to learn it, than for the rest of us to devise new terminology. To replace 'he' by 'she', as some authors now do, seems the worst of all worlds and a good example of the incoherence of what is sometimes termed 'reverse discrimination'. If 'he' were an immoral or otherwise unacceptable usage, then so must the use of 'she' be immoral, as well as incorrect.<sup>3</sup>

One or two additional comments, sometimes substantive, have been made, but economic factors have necessitated that most of them be added as footnotes or at the end of the chapter in question.

But what, the novice may ask, about the effect of recent currents of thought and shifts of ideology and perspective? Marxism, for instance, has made great inroads in the philosophy of education in Australia since this book was first written. In Britain in the same period interest in phenomenology and existentialism has increased. In the study of education a number of sociological critiques have tried to suggest that the type of

<sup>2</sup>See Robin Barrow, *Injustice, Inequality and Ethics*, ch. 1.

<sup>3</sup>On this topic, see further Robin Barrow, *Injustice, Inequality and Ethics*.

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## *Introduction*

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This book is intended as an introduction to philosophy of education for students in colleges and university departments of education who have had little or no previous instruction in philosophical methods and techniques. We shall, therefore, be at pains to explain as clearly and as accurately as is necessary any technical or semi-technical terms introduced in the course of the exposition. There will not, as a matter of fact, be many such terms and readers need have no fear that we shall blind them with jargon. Anyone with a modicum of commonsense who is prepared to exercise thought should find no great difficulty in understanding what we have to say, always provided that he or she comes to the book with an open mind and not predisposed to regard philosophy as an essentially esoteric and difficult study capable of mastery by only a few gifted individuals.

The aim of this book is, not to provide readers with information on a set of topics for regurgitation in an examination, but rather to attempt to show philosophy in action. Of course, we believe in what we have positively to say; but the stress is on how to do philosophy. Hence we have not attempted to review the literature in the field, and the topics chosen for analysis are, in a sense, simply vehicles for the exercise of philosophizing. One of our main objects will have been achieved if we can help

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readers to become more skilful at philosophical debate, able to think about and discuss in a philosophic manner issues which they have not met before and on which they have not read what other philosophers have to say. We should like to contribute to making philosophers in ways specified by John Wisdom (adding the rider that the second way to which Wisdom refers is not, to our mind, quite so inadequate as he implies):

In a sense, philosophy cannot be taught – any more than one can teach riding or dancing or musical appreciation. However, philosophers can be made. They can be made in two ways, namely by practice and by precept. The first method is the one usually adopted by lecturers in philosophy or performing philosophers. They themselves perform philosophic antics in front of their students, interlarded with anecdotes about the antics of contemporary performers. This is called giving a course in modern philosophy. Or, they tell stories about performers of the past: then they are giving a course in the history of philosophy. Sometimes their students are able to imitate these performances; they are the 'good students'. The second method of making philosophers, namely, the precept method, has not been much used. This is because even good philosophers have been confused about what it is they are trying to do, and have been, like many good riders, unable to say what it is about their methods which makes them good.<sup>1</sup>

But if philosophizing is a skill, then as with skills generally probably the best way to get people to command the philosophic skills is to insist on their being practised, and this will involve writing and talking philosophy, having one's arguments and conclusions subjected to the criticism of one's peers and tutors, having to defend one's arguments and so on. Obviously, simply to read this book is not to engage in these sorts of activities, and hence *pari passu* with the reading must go talk and discussion. No opportunity should be lost to follow up the arguments deployed in the ensuing chapters in conversation with others, for not only will this result in increased expertise but it will lead also

<sup>1</sup> Wisdom, J., *Problems of Mind and Matter* (Cambridge University Press, 1963) p. 2.

to an increasing realization that anyone who is prepared to take time and trouble can come to advance ideas, theories and arguments of *his own* as opposed simply to repeating parrot-fashion, the ideas, theories and arguments of others. This brings us back to the suggestion that philosophy is not to be thought of as a fixed body of information waiting to be digested but as an activity through the exercise of which men and women can think things through, in concert with others, for themselves. In this connection the following description of the existentialist notion of 'inauthentic existence' is, perhaps, pertinent, although the reader would do well to discount the portentous theological overtones:

A man who is leading an inauthentic existence is in a condition of *Verfallensein*. He is in a fallen state. . . . Such a man ignores the reality of his own relation to the world. There is an ambiguity in his dealings with reality. He partly knows what things are, but partly does not, because he is so entirely caught up in the way other people see them, the labels attached to them by the world at large. He cannot straightforwardly form any opinion, and his statements are partly his own, partly those of people in general. . . .

It may be that a man can go through the whole of his life in the inauthentic state, and he may never emerge from it. But reflection may bring his attention to the true state of affairs and may open his eyes to his position in the world, which is above all a position of responsibility. Realizing, that is, the uniqueness of his position as a human being, he may see the force of his own reflective capacity, namely that he and he alone is responsible for the world's having significance.<sup>2</sup>

Although we shall deal with any technical philosophical points as and when they come up in the text, it is appropriate at this point to make one or two observations about philosophy in general and about philosophy of education in particular. A fair amount of talk is heard these days about the sterility of philosophical analysis, about how it is that once upon a time philosophers used to debate fundamental questions concerning God,

<sup>2</sup> Warnock, Mary, *Existentialism* (Oxford University Press, 1970) p. 57.