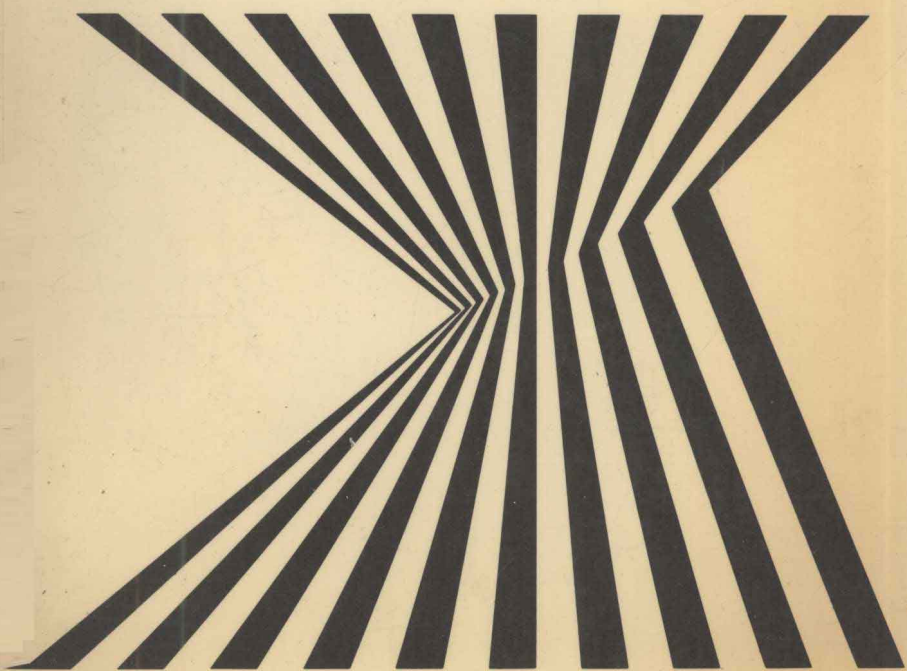


*Introductory Studies in Philosophy of Education*  
*Series Editors: Philip Snelders & Colin Wringe*

# **EDUCATION AND THE VALUE OF KNOWLEDGE**



**M.A.B. Degenhardt**

# *Education and the Value of Knowledge*

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## Editors' Foreword

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Books that are available to students of philosophy of education may, in general, be divided into two types. There are collections of essays and articles making up a more or less random selection; and there are books which explore a single theme or argument in depth but, having been written to break new ground, are often unsuitable for general readers or those near the beginning of their course. The Introductory Studies in Philosophy of Education are intended to fill what is widely regarded as an important gap in this range.

The series aims to provide a collection of short, readable works which, besides being philosophically sound, will seem relevant and accessible to future and existing teachers without a previous knowledge of philosophy or of philosophy of education. In the planning of the series account has necessarily been taken of the tendency of present-day courses of teacher education to follow a more integrated and less discipline-based pattern than formerly. Account has also been taken of the fact that students on three- and four-year courses, as well as those on shorter postgraduate and in-service courses, quite understandably expect their theoretical studies to have a clear bearing on their practical concerns, and on their dealings with children. Each book, therefore, starts from a real and widely recognised problem in the educational field, and explores the main philosophical approaches which illuminate and clarify it, or suggests a coherent standpoint even when it does not claim to provide a solution. Attention is paid to the work of both mainstream philosophers and philosophers of education. For students who wish to pursue particular questions in depth, each book contains a bibliographical essay or a substantial list of suggestions for further reading. It is intended that a full range of the main topics recently discussed by philosophers of education should eventually be covered by the series.

Besides having considerable experience in the teaching of philosophy of education, the majority of authors writing in the series have already received some recognition in their particular fields. In addition, therefore, to reviewing and criticising existing work, each author has his or her own positive contribution to make to further discussion.

In *Education and the Value of Knowledge* Dr Degenhardt deals with such all-important questions of curriculum justification as 'why do we

value knowledge?'; 'why is it that we value some kinds of knowledge more than others?'; 'can we simply perceive knowledge to be good, or is our belief that it is so grounded in man's nature, or that of knowledge itself?'. Traditional theories of justification are examined, and there is detailed discussion of contributions to this question by such well-known philosophers as Hirst, Peters, Elliott and White.

In the final chapter Dr Degenhardt advances and defends his own suggestion that the dichotomy between instrumentally useful and intrinsically worthwhile knowledge is a false one, and that educationally valuable knowledge is that which gives meaning to the individual's life and enables him to determine his own ends.

PHILIP SNELDERS  
COLIN WRINGE

## Preface

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This book considers one problem in the theory of education. It is intended as an introductory work and the bulk of it comes in Chapter 2, which surveys some of the main approaches to the problem that have been suggested. To attempt to cover such a range of thinkers and theorists in a few pages is inevitably to risk distortions and misrepresentation. So the book is likely to do positive harm in so far as it is read as anything other than an introduction and invitation to a study of the originals. The problem considered has to do with different kinds of knowledge and their value. I have treated the arts as an area of knowledge without facing up to questions about whether they are, and in what sense. However, this will, I hope, emphasise the importance of such questions to educational theory.

I wish to thank former colleagues at Stockwell College of Education (now unfortunately closed) and present colleagues at the University of Tasmania: formal and informal discussions with them have enriched and clarified my thinking on the issues discussed. I am particularly grateful to Miss Vicki Raymond and Miss Joy McRae for their help in checking manuscripts and typescripts and to Mrs Cate Lowry for typing the text with great speed and efficiency.

## **Education and the Value of Knowledge**

*Introductory Studies in Philosophy of Education*  
*Series Editors:* PHILIP SNELDERS and COLIN WRINGE

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*Education and the Value of Knowledge* by  
M. A. B. Degenhardt

*Can We Teach Children To Be Good* by  
Roger Straughan

*Means and Ends in Education* by Brenda Cohen



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# I

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## *Introduction: The Problem and Why It Matters*

In educating people we try either to teach them something, or to encourage them to learn for themselves. What is to be learned may be straightforward facts, or it may be skills, attitudes, habits, beliefs, and so on. Whichever is the case, the attempt is to change people in some way. This being so, education must involve judgements about what sort of changes are desired. This is true for 'traditionalists' passing on knowledge from above and for 'progressivists' encouraging active growth from within. Either way, value judgements must be made regarding what to pass on or what growth to foster. Lively debate is likely to ensue. This book considers just one aspect of what is involved in deciding what to teach: one aspect of the problem of curriculum justification.

The problem is big and complex, and two aspects must be kept in mind here, though they can only be explored in companion volumes. First, there is the question of who ought to choose the curriculum. It is hard to decide between such powerful claimants as teachers, parents, priests, students, employers, politicians and pupils. This question is related to, but distinct from, the question to be considered here: whether there can be grounds for choosing a curriculum that are valid regardless of who does the choosing. Secondly, there is the question of what it is useful to learn. Most people would agree that we should teach children things that are likely to be useful in later life: useful to the individual or to his community. So the

curriculum should include items that will in time help pupils to earn a living, run a home, fulfil obligations as citizens, and so on. But deciding what will be useful for children to learn is doubly difficult. It is partly a problem of predicting their future lives, and partly a problem of principle. For in judging what will be useful for someone we are also making judgements about how he ought to live. This is why there are protests when schools teach different 'useful' things to children of different sexes or social groups, thereby preparing them for different roles and opportunities.

However, not everything taught in school is taught because it is useful, and the aspect of the problem of curriculum justification to be considered in this book arises as follows. We might agree that an education is deficient if it omits the following: scientific explanations of the natural world, the human past, literature and art, another language and culture, different religions and ideologies that men have lived by, systematic investigations of human thought, conduct and institutions and advanced mathematics. For we might find knowledge of such things valuable and believe that it should be taught in schools; and we might back up this belief with rather vague talk of 'culture', 'higher learning', 'worthwhile activities', 'serious pursuits', 'realm of intellect', and so on. But in urging the value of such knowledge we would be unwise to claim that it is useful. Certainly for a few pupils much of such knowledge may indeed turn out to be useful in later life: if, say, they earn a living as scientific researchers, archaeologists, priests, or journalists. And for many more pupils odd items of such knowledge may turn out to be useful: helping them, say, to recognise Athens when they go on holiday, to spot a disease, to win a TV quiz show, or to pick up a Velázquez at a jumble sale. But it can hardly be claimed that such bodies of knowledge are generally useful to everyone. So if they are indeed worthy of study by people in general this must be on account of something other than their usefulness. The difficulty, though, is to see what this something else can be: to see what justifies the use of labour, resources and perhaps coercion to teach children things that are unlikely to be useful. This is the problem with which this book is concerned.

A common solution says that such non-useful knowledge has

## INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM AND WHY IT MATTERS

a different kind of value, that it is valuable not because it is useful or a means to some further end, but because it is an end in itself: it is intrinsically rather than instrumentally good. Some critics reply that such talk is really a disguised admission of inability to argue the case for the 'higher learning'. Defenders reply that it cannot be the case that all human goods are instrumental goods, or means to further goods. For then we would have a most peculiar state of affairs in which X is only good because it leads on to Y, and Y in turn is only good because it leads on to Z, and so on to infinity: in which case the whole business could hardly have got started. It seems that if there are to be any goods in the world, then some things must simply be goods in themselves. Thus it might be agreed that happiness is intrinsically good: that it just *is* a good thing for people to be happy regardless of whether this happiness leads on to other things.

If this argument is correct, then intrinsic goods seem to be superior to instrumental goods. For something that is good as a means to some further end just happens to be good in certain circumstances. It only acquires its goodness from some more fundamental intrinsic good to which it is a means. While something that is good in itself is good regardless of circumstance.

Given, then, that knowledge is often an instrumental good, can it be maintained that some, perhaps all, knowledge is also one of the ultimate intrinsic goods? In due course we will see that this suggestion raises several serious difficulties, one of which must be stated at once. If we are to say that some knowledge is a good in itself we need to be able to specify the marks or characteristics of such knowledge, and to find reasons for finding it intrinsically valuable. Otherwise we may be arbitrarily claiming some absolute and inscrutable value for mere personal preferences. Yet it is difficult to see what kinds of grounds could be given for finding some or all knowledge intrinsically valuable. For by definition a claim to intrinsic value cannot be backed up by reference to extrinsic usefulness. In other words, to be able to talk of knowledge as intrinsically valuable we must be able to show grounds for valuing it without making any reference to the use to which that knowledge might be put, or to other advantages it might yield.

Theorists have often grappled with this problem, and Chapter 2 will explore the main *kinds* of answers they have proposed. The problem being a perennial one, reference will be to past and present thinkers. But as we are not studying the history of ideas, answers will be grouped according to kind of argument rather than chronology. We shall first consider the views of intuitionist theorists who believe that the value of something is a self-evident objective property 'intuitable' by any clear, unprejudiced mind. Then we shall consider 'naturalistic' arguments according to which certain values follow from the nature of man: the several versions of this argument embodying different views of man's nature. Next we shall look at arguments from the nature of knowledge rather than man, and conclude the survey by considering the possibility of a religious answer. Finding difficulties with all these approaches we will see why some theorists believe it impossible and/or undesirable for educators to make judgements about the value or educational worth of knowledge. Such a view, however, could be damaging to education, and Chapter 3 will propose a positive argument whereby knowledge is valuable in a way that takes us beyond a simple dichotomy between extrinsic and intrinsic value.

All this may sound like arid theorising best ignored by busy teachers, so something must now be said about why our problem is among the most urgent and practical of all educational questions.

First, any teacher is likely to be challenged as to the worth of what he teaches. The challenge may come from a bored pupil who sees no point in history; from a parent who wants his children to get job qualifications rather than study astronomy; from a practically minded headmaster who does not like poetry. It is not easy to find answers to satisfy these questioners, and the thoughtful teacher will feel the need for answers to satisfy himself in face of the doubts they raise. They may, after all, be right: perhaps it is a mistake to require pupils to partake of the 'high culture' of non-useful knowledge. A teacher troubled by such misgivings may lose confidence and enthusiasm for his work, or seek a compromise by teaching his subjects so as to make them more 'useful'. But horrible barbarisms and corruptions can arise when the teacher of a subject with its own worth

## INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM AND WHY IT MATTERS

and coherence tries to make it 'useful' or 'relevant' by artificially linking it to the exigencies of daily life.

These questions may also arise when we reflect on how we educate ourselves. Anxious to improve and inform our own minds, but unable to study everything, we may ask what is most worth knowing about and why. We may even wonder if we should spend *any* time and energy on self-education when we might be boozing or campaigning for social justice.

The problem arises again at the level of overall educational planning when teachers and others design courses of study. Indeed, it may be here that those who value the 'high culture' are most likely to lose out against those who care only for useful learning. Anti-intellectualist attitudes are often influential, and in education they can pass as enlightened and humane. Consider, for example, the appeal and impact of the Newsom Committee's view that education makes sense if it is practical, realistic and vocational (Newsom, 1963, ch. 14). And in an era of educational economy the non-useful is at risk.

These considerations render one kind of answer to our problem simply inadequate. Challenged to show the intrinsic value of medieval studies or astrophysics, we may incline to say that if someone gets 'into' these subjects in the right way he may or may not find them valuable: but if he does not then there is nothing more to say. There is much to be said for this view: perhaps beauty, knowledge and understanding simply are things you either do or do not value regardless of any amount of argument. Unfortunately, such a position is necessarily without persuasive power: for it involves saying that if I value something and want to include it in the curriculum, then I can say nothing to change the feelings of those who disagree. So there are reasons of strategy as well as principle for seeking more positive justifications.

There is one further point. The reason why we teach something makes a difference to how we teach it and thereby to how we organise schools, educate teachers, use examinations, and so on.

**Summary of Chapter I**

Some knowledge seems to deserve a place in the curriculum, though not because it is useful. It is thought to be intrinsically rather than instrumentally good. For several reasons it is important to work out just what knowledge is good in this way, and why.

- (1) We cannot teach or study everything. Some selection has to be made.
- (2) Why we teach something may determine how we teach it.
- (3) Teachers need to be able to answer reasonable critics and to feel confident of the worth of what they are teaching.
- (4) Some people would like to confine the curriculum to what is useful. If they are wrong they must be answered. But –
- (5) They may be right.

## 2

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# *Some Theories of the Inherent Worth of Knowledge*

### **I Intuitionist Theories**

Notwithstanding the arguments of Chapter 1, readers may still doubt the point of this inquiry. They may care so much for their own discipline that to ask for proof of its worth sounds like some philistine affront: the call for a *proof* of the worth of physics or poetry can only come from one who is blind to their worth. The value of these activities is simply *there*, lying *in them* and waiting to be seen. Education may help someone to see such value more clearly: nothing more can or should be attempted.

To think this is, perhaps inadvertently, to align oneself with the philosophical doctrine of ethical intuitionism, according to which ultimate values are objective, but not a matter for argument or proof. Rather, the good and the bad are objectively known because they are intuited. We need no arguments to show that human creativity is desirable or that wanton cruelty is undesirable: we just *know* that one is good and the other bad.

Two points must be stressed if we are to avoid misunderstanding intuitionism. First, the claim that our intuitions give us objective knowledge is not a claim about subjective feelings or personal preferences. Secondly, intuitionism need not postulate some mysterious power of knowing, or non-sensory perception. Rather it holds that, unless things go wrong, we can all know what things are good and bad because their goodness or badness are self-evident qualities to be seen by all.



It will be helpful to attend to an influential version of ethical intuitionism expounded by G. E. Moore in his *Principia Ethica* (Moore, 1960 [1903]). As a philosopher Moore reflects not on individual moral problems but on the ultimate basis of our moral understanding. Here he thinks there are two questions.

- (1) What kinds of things ought to exist for their own sakes?
- (2) What kinds of actions ought we to perform?

The answers to (1), he believes, can be known by intuition and only by intuition. These answers, in turn, enable us to work out the answers to (2): for if some states of affairs ought to exist for their own sakes, then we ought to do the things most likely to bring about such states. This sets Moore apart from most intuitionists who have believed that our duties (or what things we ought to do) are self-evident, and it makes his theory more clearly relevant to our present concern with what knowledge is good in itself.

Moore thinks that the goodness of intrinsically good things can be recognised but not defined. This is because good is a simple, unanalysable property. There are two kinds of things in the world: simple things like colours which cannot be analysed into components, and complex things like horses which can (legs, heart, liver, and so on). Goodness belongs to the first kind. 'Yellow and good, we say, are not complex: they are notions of that simple kind out of which definitions are composed and with which the power of further defining ceases' (Moore, 1960, p. 8). Such indefinability, however, need not trouble us; for we can recognise the goodness of something just as we can recognise its yellowness. Certainly we can sometimes be confused here: for it is not always clear whether something which is good is intrinsically good, or good as a means to something else. Moore suggests we guard against such confusion and focus our attention on the intrinsic goodness of something by 'considering what value we should attach to it, if it existed in absolute isolation, stripped of all its usual accompaniments' (ibid., p. 91).

Once apply this method of 'absolute isolation' and, Moore confides, the answer to questions about what things are good in themselves becomes pleasingly simple.