



Философия образования: ВЫЗОВЫ СОВРЕМЕННОСТИ

Philosophy of Education: Challenges of Modernity

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Research Article / Научная статья

What is a Philosophy of Education?

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Abstract. The article considers what is a *philosophy* and its relation to *education*. The modern academic development of philosophy has questioned the theoretical basis of specific aspects of knowledge and human experience, including education. It is an active rather than a passive or descriptive discipline. Education is defined similarly as a process by which knowledge, skills (including collecting empirical evidence and reasoning from it), cultural norms, values, and beliefs are acquired. The development of the modern philosophy of education is considered with its emphasis on conceptual analysis. Education is philosophically the conscious development of maturity requiring capacity for both intellectual and economic autonomy. Issues in the contemporary philosophy of education are then considered, particularly the challenges of post-modernism and post-truth for a philosophy of education in an Internet world. It identifies the need for comparative philosophical perspectives other than Occidental ones and suggests philosophical anthropology and comparative education as potential guides. It concludes that although there is now no consensus on how a coherent contemporary philosophy of education may be developed, analysis of concepts, metaphysical reasoning, and ethics may still provide a basis for a coherent and defensible philosophy of education whatever the comparative cultural setting.

Keywords: philosophy, education, teaching, training, learning, metaphysics, ethics, reasoning

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Introduction

The article offers a brief answer to a large question, indeed one which has concerned humanity, informally and formally, throughout its history. There are also fundamental questions of comparative culture and religion which provide further perspectives on what *education* might be: its purpose, content, structure, and conduct. It will be seen immediately that many contending perspectives on *education*, including the vexed question of *ideology*, should be taken into consideration if a comprehensive account of historical and contemporary debates and their practical realization is to be provided. This is not possible in the space available. Instead, the article focuses on how and why philosophical issues and perspectives have been and still are useful in understanding what is *education* and how it should be conducted. This is followed by a consideration of contemporary issues in the philosophy of education and potential future directions. In doing so, some historical and comparative examples are given, together with a guide to the literature in the notes and suggestions for further reading.

What is Philosophy?

First, what is *philosophy*? As is well known, the word is derived from the Greek: *φιλοσοφία*, *Philosophia*, or ‘the love of wisdom’. Dictionary definitions say simply that it is the study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence, especially when considered as an academic discipline. It may also refer to a specific system of philosophical thought. The ancient and classical origins of philosophy are, for example, found in the work of Socrates via Plato¹, Aristotle, and Diogenes. This had much to say about the nature and purpose of *education*. It was the basis of Roman education² and had a fundamental influence in shaping Western educational thought in Mediaeval, Renaissance, early modern Europe³, and subsequently.⁴ There is, of course, the colloquial use of the term *philosophy* as indicating a general theory guiding action. This has been developed systematically

¹ *The Republic*, Plato’s famous Socratic dialogue of around 375 B.C., is recognized as perhaps the first book in the Western tradition to consider issues in the philosophy of education.

² See *Greek and Roman Education* by R. Barrow [1]. See also *Roman Education* by A.S. Wilkins [2]. The latter is an excellent brief introduction, unfortunately now difficult to find.

³ John Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile, or On Education* (1762), are well-known examples from early modern England and France. Rousseau, an intellectual autodidact, himself abandoned at birth to orphanages his five children by Thérèse Levasseur, against the wishes of the mother. The following [3] are still useful descriptive accounts. See also [4].

⁴ John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (1916) is an American classic of the early 20th century. A.O’Hear’s *History of the philosophy of education* [5], is a valuable succinct survey.

to form an *ideology* based on *belief* in the merits of a particular set of policies or courses of action.⁵

What is distinctive about *philosophy*? First, it is essentially an enquiry rather than the systematic setting out of beliefs and their armament against challenge. Secondly, such enquiry is a scholarly one, which in its modern form has evolved into important and specific areas. *Metaphysics*, of which *ontology* and the philosophy of mind are integral parts, asks questions about the essence of existence and reality, the nature of the *mind* and its relationship with the body, including the perennial question of *consciousness*; *epistemology* which enquires about the basis of knowledge and its relation to belief; *ethics* which asks what *moral values* are and how may they be justified; and *logic* which questions the rules and processes that are used in formal thinking and reasoning, allowing firm conclusions to be reached from reliable premises. Logic is also used in other disciplines such as mathematics.

The modern academic development of philosophy has seen its use in questioning the theoretical basis of specific aspects of knowledge and human experience. Examples are the philosophy of science, of religion (as distinct from theology), language, aesthetics, politics, economics, of the social sciences, sport and physical culture, and *education*. There is also the *history* of philosophy. The important thing to remember is that the value of philosophy is that it is an *active* rather than a *passive* discipline. Despite its scholarly foundations, it is important to remember, as E. R. Emmet has commented, that: 'Too often Philosophy tends to be regarded as a remote and abstruse subject which can only be profitably studied by the brilliant few. It seems to me that philosophical matters are often less difficult and more important than is generally supposed. We all philosophize whenever we attempt to handle abstract ideas and it may matter very much whether we do it well or badly.' [8] This applies no less to the philosophy of education.

What is Education?

A further initial definition is required: What is *education*? This is necessary if we are to understand how philosophical concepts may be used in understanding its theory and practice. The term has been used in many and diverse ways, as we shall indicate below. It is, however, accepted generally that education is a *process* by which knowledge, skills (including those of collecting empirical evidence and reasoning from it), cultural norms, values, and beliefs are acquired. Such learning may be systematic through formal pedagogical instruction by teachers in settings from the school to the university and advanced research centre. It may also be informal, but again systematic as, for instance, through andragogical instruction as in adult education; through informal community settings (see, for example, [9]); through self-tuition by the auto-didact; and the tacit recognition by individuals of

⁵ As indicated, ideology is a vexed question, with a vast and contentious literature. L.S. Feuer's *Ideology and the Ideologists* [6] is suggested as an introduction. See also [7].

the lessons of experience and the realisation with Michael Polanyi, that we can know more than we can tell [10].

How curricula are developed and the choice of teaching and learning methods used are well-known and too numerous to consider here. It should be noted however that teaching is about transmitting knowledge and skills, while learning is about its acquisition and retention. Philosophical concepts are valuable in considering their validity and, indeed, moral status. The use of *indoctrination* is an example. R. F. Atkinson, when comparing *instruction* and *indoctrination*, commented pessimistically: ‘There is too little communication between academic moral philosophy and the philosophy of education. They are separate countries, and a citizen of one finds himself an alien in the other. The language change is confusing, and it is hard to feel altogether confident of one’s judgement of what is and is not worth saying once one has crossed the frontier’ [11. P. 171]⁶. He goes on to say, however, that: ‘There seems still to be point in emphasizing the sense in which there are open options in morality and consequently in moral education’ [11. P. 171] (see also [13, 14]). Atkinson is correct in that such connections are still found in discussions of the relationship between *philosophy* and *education* as is seen below.

What is a Modern Philosophy of Education?

A useful short account is that of J.P. White which is summarised and commented on below [15]. White accepts that essentially a modern philosophy of education, which began in the United States and later in the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth, adopts philosophical perspectives to clarify and understand issues in the theory and practice of education. At first, it focused on conceptual analysis in the same way as other areas of philosophy, such as the philosophy of aesthetics, religion, and science. Moreover, it became an *applied* philosophy intending to ‘...clarify the aims, content, methods, and distribution of education, appropriate to contemporary society’ [15. P. 216]. White draws a useful, if cautious, analogy when he says: ‘As such, philosophy of education in some ways resembles ‘medical ethics’ which brings moral philosophy and philosophy of mind to bear on dilemmas faced by health care professionals. The philosophical horizons of philosophy of education are, however, wider, covering... issues drawn from virtually every area of general philosophy’ [15. P. 216].

Some modern philosophers of education have emphasized a universal aim of cultivating⁷ personal *autonomy*, a philosophical issue in itself. This would enable⁸ individuals to identify and aspire to personal goals in life; and not have these ‘...imposed whether by custom, parents, teachers, or religious and political leaders’ [15. P. 217]. It requires the development of knowledge and instrumental skills,

⁶ It is worth noting that S. Blackburn did not have an entry in *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* [12] for ‘Education’ nor did individuals, such as the prominent English analytical philosophers of education R.S. Peters and P.H. Hirst.

⁷ See the Latin *ēducatīō*: ‘To rear, to bring up.’

⁸ Today, the word ‘empower’ would probably be used.

necessary for individuals to be aware of and realise potential options given the social world inhabited⁹. Education is thus seen philosophically as the conscious development of maturity which requires a capacity for both intellectual and economic autonomy.

The focus is less on seeking knowledge for its own sake, which egalitarians associated with privileged élites, than on providing opportunities for education to the population generally, with implications for vocation and citizenship. The aim is not *altruism* in the classical sense, but: ‘From the educator’s point of view, however, there seems every reason to bring children up to see their own good as inextricably intermeshed with others’ [15. P. 217]. From this perspective, moral education should be integral to the process not a separate aspect of the curriculum. The philosophy of education must also take political philosophy into consideration, notably ideology and the increasingly dominant role of the State, whatever its economic base.

What is a Contemporary Philosophy of Education?

Over twenty-five years ago, J.P. White concluded his essay on problems in the philosophy of education by referring to ‘...more grandiose abstract inquiries, more congenial it seems at present to the American than the British temper, on the challenges and perils of something called post-modernism’ [Ibid]. Today, it is claimed that we are in a *post-truth* era which is without consensus on what are objective standards for *truth*. It is not something new as the English essayist Francis Bacon, a pioneer of empiricism, pointed out in ‘Of Truth’ published first in 1597. [16] This has been exacerbated by the development of the Internet and social media with their challenges to what constitutes authority.¹⁰ Today, it is found more often in political and social discourse than in the natural and physical sciences, although it has affected the latter, even mathematics as recent controversy in the United States indicates.

Such trends influence perspectives on the contemporary philosophy of education, with ideology and opinion playing dominant roles, although it is argued, *pace* Bacon, that they always have done. Examples are Marxist and neo-Marxist perspectives on education (for a recent comment see [18]), critical theory with its origins in the Frankfurt School¹¹, feminism and gender, with their implications for what constitutes human nature [20], radical pedagogy with its revolutionary notion of false consciousness, notably the work of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire [21], indigenous education, and, most recently, critical race theory with its implications for decolonising the curriculum and positive discrimination in educational

⁹ For example, the capacity of females to achieve autonomy through education has changed in a Taliban controlled Islamic Emirate.

¹⁰ F. Wheen’s *How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered the World...* [17] is a very amusing critique of this trend.

¹¹ There is a considerable literature on this. T. Bottomore’s *The Frankfurt School* [19] is a brief introduction.

provision. The teaching of controversial subjects and their history and historiography is also affected, with the Atlantic slave trade, the Holocaust, Stalinism, and the Maoist Cultural Revolution in the People's Republic of China examples [22]. This poses problems for the concept and practice of intellectual and academic freedom as an universal value, always a core theme of the philosophy of education.

Conclusion

In short, there is now no consensus on how a coherent contemporary philosophy of education may be developed. Until the 21st-century academic philosophy of education was dominated by Anglo-American philosophy. The challenges noted above again have an Occidental origin, and other philosophical perspectives such as the Confucian [23], Orthodox [24], Islamic [25], and indigenous African should be used comparatively. The concept of *ubuntu* or human dignity is an example from the last [9; 26]. This is particularly necessary for current work in the philosophy of knowledge and education, with philosophical anthropology and comparative education potential guides.

A much earlier attempt to answer the question: 'What is a philosophy of education?' concluded that it was essential to ask respectively: 'What is an analysis of education; a metaphysics of education; and an ethics of education?' That is to clarify whatever terms are obscure; to provide an ontological theory of existence as a basis for its *actual* operation in life's practice; to provide moral justification for such practice; to show how education develops an understanding of ethical reasoning [27]. This still provides a firm basis for a coherent and defensible philosophy of education, whatever the comparative cultural setting.

A Guide to Reading

Books

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Journals

- Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Taylor and Francis: <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rept20/current>
- Educational Theory*, Wiley: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/17415446>
- Ethics and Education*, Taylor and Francis: <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/ceae20/current>
- Journal of Moral Education, Taylor and Francis*: <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/cjme20/current>
- Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Wiley: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/14679752>
- Studies in Philosophy and Education: An International Journal*, Springer: <https://www.springer.com/journal/11217>

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Что такое философия образования?

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Аннотация. В статье рассматривается вопрос, что такое философия и как она соотносится с образованием. Современные академические подходы в философии ставят под сомнение теоретическую основу конкретных аспектов знания и человеческого опыта, включая образование. Это активная, а не пассивная или описательная дисциплина. Образование определяется аналогичным образом как процесс приобретения знаний, навыков (включая сбор эмпирических данных и рассуждений на их основе), культурных норм, ценностей и убеждений. Автор статьи рассматривает развитие современной философии образования с акцентом на концептуальный анализ. Отмечается, что с философской точки зрения образование — сознательное развитие зрелости, требующее способности к интеллектуальной и экономической автономии. Рассматриваются проблемы современной философии образования, в частности, вызовы постмодернизма и постправды в мире Интернета. Определяется необходимость сравнительных философских подходов, отличных от принятых в западном мире; в качестве потенциальных альтернатив предлагаются философская антропология и сравнительное образование. Автор замечает, что, хотя в настоящее время не существует консенсуса относительно того, как может быть разработана последовательная современная философия образования, анализ концепций, метафизических рассуждений и этики все же может стать основой для последовательной и обоснованной философии образования независимо от той или иной культурной среды.

Ключевые слова: философия, образование, преподавание, обучение, познание, метафизика, этика, рассуждения

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