

Running head: HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

The Large View of Education: Some History and Philosophy

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So what is education, anyway? Who is to be taught? What is he to be taught, and how? And to what extent ought we to anticipate success?, or to ask it another way, To what extent are we sure, and how are we sure, that teaching is even possible? To what extent is education an action or attribute of a teacher, and to what extent of a student? Or, if the whole matter can be taken at once: Who should learn what so as to become what and do what, and how and by whom and with whom is it to be taught? (Brann, 1979) These questions are of a kind so fundamental that they are seldom asked, but always and inevitably answered, at least implicitly, by the mechanisms and structures and forms that education takes in a society. Indeed, it is a simple truism that *there can be no system of education* that does not assume at least tentative answers to these questions. The substance and essence of educational philosophy, then, is the direct and focused encounter with them, the effort to engage them, the inquiry into them and into their implications. As we shall see, they are approached (consciously and unconsciously) in widely different ways in different times and places, and some constants nevertheless remain; and it is best to face the questions head-on in order to understand education, what it itself is and what we would have it be for us, rather than tacitly to reflect the prejudices of the educational establishment we as teachers represent.

Greek Origins of Western Educational Philosophy

Probably no inquiry into the history of Western philosophy – certainly not one into the history of educational philosophy – can responsibly begin but with a look at the world of the classical Greeks.

It is not known exactly when or how systems of education took form in ancient Greece, but it can be inferred from the absence of references to writing and education in the epics of Homer – apart from a brief allusion to Achilles' having had a tutor – that there was no such formal

establishment in those early days (early first millennium BCE). Their “system,” or what there was of one, probably did not differ much from what could have been found throughout the world: wealthy and royal men would be trained in the ways of warfare, and where culturally applicable in agriculture and poetry, by private tutors (Boyd, 1921). Within a few hundred years after Homer, however, when the Mediterranean invention of writing had spread and Athens had become democratic, a system of small schools (from the Greek *schole*, or *leisure*) developed; and then, as many prominent Greek city-states grew in size and wealth, a class of professional teachers arose who were known collectively as *Sophists*, from the Greek word *sophia*, or *wisdom* (Boyd, 1921; Nakosteen, 1965; etc.).

The Greek schools divided boys by age, teaching the youngest to read, write, and count; as they got older they studied the poems of Homer, which were for them an opportunity both for the study of literature and of history; by puberty their studies became largely gymnastic and athletic; and, finally, as adolescents they studied music, which was used to accompany their readings of Homer. As papyrus was introduced to Greece in or around the fifth century BCE, the ability to read and write became the basic educational requisites for democratic citizenship (Nakosteen, 1965), and most of the focus of education, as determined by the cultural emphases of the Greeks themselves, was on molding virtuous citizens. As their societies grew, however, a wealthy aristocracy created demand for higher education, and this demand was met by the Sophists.

The Sophists were mostly itinerant teachers who sold their services to young men as they traveled from town to town. Their fees were typically high, and their promises extraordinary. The focus of the sophistical education was rhetoric, as the Sophists were teaching an elite who strove for power and influence, and their claims often included the ability to make masterful orators out of *anyone* who could afford the tuition (Boyd, Nakosteen, Plato, etc.). The Sophists attracted some criticism for their de-emphasizing of virtue in favor of learning to persuade and to gain power, and

even for their conflation of virtue with the ability to persuade and gain power. Before the close of the fifth century they found one of their loudest and most effective critics in the person of the Athenian Socrates, who was nevertheless widely accused of being one of them.

Socrates charged no fee, established no school, and wrote nothing. He seemed not to have students so much as disciples, and not to give lectures or lessons so much as to have antagonistic conversations in public places. He claimed to have been told by an oracle that he was the wisest man in Athens, which he first thought absurd but later discovered to be true insofar as he alone in Athens knew that he knew nothing at all. His mode of “educating” was the dialectic, in which he asked leading questions and provoked his interlocutors into a state of perplexity, into a realization of their own contradictions, of the erroneousness of their beliefs. This stunned, empty impasse, the state of being stuck and dazed and empty of prejudice, aware of one’s own ignorance – this state of *aporia* – was taken by Socrates’ followers to be the only state in which true learning occurs. Most people do not enjoy the experience, however, and Socrates was eventually tried and executed on charges of making the weaker argument the stronger and “corrupting the youth” of Athens. His star pupil, Plato, went on to found a school and to write many dialogues in which the character of Socrates appears, and which remain among the most subtle and important texts in all philosophy. In these dialogues Plato continually undermines the Sophists and presents philosophy (literally, *love of wisdom*) as the noble alternative to their teachings. Education for the philosopher, as Plato would have it, is not a means to an end but is an end in itself, the pursuit of truth and the alignment of the soul with the Good.

Education is characterized by Plato (or, more accurately, by characters such as Socrates in Plato’s dialogues, notably in *The Phaedrus* and *The Symposium*) as a distinctly *erotic* endeavor, initiated and guided by *eros*, or a yearning in the soul for truth, wisdom, and beauty. Indeed, in much of

ancient Greece education became mingled with physical eroticism in the practice of pederasty, which was widely accepted, at least in the upper classes. In the typical arrangement, a pubescent boy – the *beloved* – would receive an education in philosophy, poetry, and mathematics as a part of his sexual relationship with his *lover*, typically a middle-aged man. This relationship would end before the boy reached adulthood, when he would typically marry and father children, perhaps eventually to find a *beloved* of his own. Though this arrangement was commonplace and apparently uncontested – perhaps in some cases even seen as a sort of rite of passage – there is some discussion in Plato’s dialogues (and, presumably, in Greek society) of whether the relationship should be seen as negative, since the lover lusts vulgarly to use the body of the boy; or as positive, since the lover’s interest in the boy is in his perception of beauty and divinity in him, and he will thus educate the boy to become more like the gods, the spark of whose beauty and divinity is apparent in his soul.

Apart from the characterization of education as being fundamentally *erotic*, perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of Plato’s notion of education is depicted in his Myth of Recollection, most clearly described in *The Meno*. In frustration at the prodding and provocation of Socrates, Meno asserts that education is impossible: I cannot learn what I already know, because I already know it; and neither can I learn what I do not already know, because I do not know to learn it. Socrates responds with a poetic account of the immortal soul, which knows everything within itself but which forgets everything before incarnating a body. All learning, then, is properly described as *recollection*: asking the right questions will lead the soul to *remember* true knowledge, and all true knowledge resides properly within every immortal soul. Education, for Socrates and Plato, is an internal motion of the soul, motivated by the erotic seductiveness of truth and beauty. The best a teacher can do, one assumes, is ask the right questions, push the right buttons, and try to provoke the internal motion.

Aristocratic vs. Democratic Education, and the Rise of Liberal Democracy

With the fall of Greek democracy fell also democratic education, and once again literacy, poetry, and mathematics were largely the domain of the wealthy few. One notable if incomplete exception was the religious education maintained first by Jewish and then Christian communities as they moved out of the Near East and into Europe. Jewish education had very early origins in the religious and cultural emphasis on the Law (and the virtue inherent in studying it) and the writings of the prophets, but until fairly late it was largely the responsibility of fathers to educate their sons, and large parts of the population probably went uneducated. The first Jewish and Christian schools were probably modeled after those of the Greeks, and they proved rather successful (Boyd, 1921). It was widely the case that such religious education was founded firmly in fundamentals of literacy and philosophy, but as all was in service of theology there remained a risk of pedagogical narrowness, and though such education was more widely available than that had by the wealthy elite, it remained out of reach for most people.

Centuries thus passed while formal education was relegated sometimes to the wealthiest elite and sometimes to the somewhat larger upper classes, but seldom or never was available to the subjugated masses. The next great rethinking of education coincided with and followed from a great rethinking of society itself, as the old aristocracies were thrown off and liberal democracy rooted itself in North America.

For millennia the leaders of nations benefitted from some manner of education, whether in warfare or letters, and when a government is envisioned as being by the people, for the people, and of the people, it follows that those people will require some similar mode of cultivation. Thus education became a concern of America's Founding Fathers.

Most of the men involved in the debate were aristocrats themselves and aristocratically educated, and were surely familiar with the ancient Greeks and Romans (as the architecture in Washington D.C. can attest). As such, they followed the Greek notions insofar as they considered it a central aim of an education to mold children into virtuous citizens, capable of participating in their own government. There was some departure after this similarity, however, and in particular with the American inclination toward pragmatism and utility; there was perhaps some poetic lip-service paid to the lofty Socratic/Platonic ideal of education as the elevation of the soul toward the divine, never to be a mere means to end, but the dominant notion was of education as a sort of civic training, a machine for the production of democratic citizens.

In 1779 Thomas Jefferson proposed a “Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge,” which would have established a public system of education, but which was not adopted by the legislature. It begins:

Whereas it appeareth that however certain forms of government are better calculated than others to protect individuals in the free exercise of their natural rights, and are at the same time themselves better guarded against degeneracy, yet experience hath shewn, that even under the best forms, those entrusted with power have, in time, and by slow operations, perverted it into tyranny; and it is believe that the most effectual means of preventing this would be, to illuminate, as far as practicable, the minds of the people at large, and more especially to give them knowledge of those facts, which history exhibiteth, that, possessed thereby of the experience of other ages and countries, they may be enabled to know ambition under all its shapes, and prompt to exert their natural powers to defeat its purposes; And whereas it is generally true that the people will be happiest whose laws are best, and are best

administered, and that laws will be wisely formed, and honestly administered, in proportion as those who form as administer them are wise and honest. . . .

Jefferson held that even under the best circumstances and forms, government tends toward tyranny, presumably even the government about to be established in the American Constitution, and that the best safeguard against such tyranny is public education. He even makes the suspicious and ambitious statement in a letter that, “ours are the only farmers who can read Homer” (he presumably means in Greek; the letter is to Crèvecoeur, 15 January 1787), and thus was propagated the noble American ideal of perfect democracy, of overcoming or ignoring logistical obstacles to afford every citizen the education previously only had by aristocrats.

It remains, however, that Jefferson’s bill was not passed, that in the view of his contemporaries the logistical difficulties of bringing aristocratic quality to democratic numbers were larger problems than Jefferson’s idealism could handle, and thus public education in America began a tumultuous history that would vary from state to state.

In the intervening years this philosophical inheritance has remained clear in public education, along with the same tension between education as an end in itself and as a means to an economic or political end. The American notion of educational utility, pushed by philosophers of education like John Dewey and others, has become culturally pervasive, and is unknowingly assumed as a first principle by every student who asks his teacher, How will we ever use this in real life?, and by every teacher who considers it a forceful question and who presents a curriculum accordingly. Yet the danger of such *practical* education is that it becomes reduced to mere training, and training for prescribed social roles; thus that we train the sons rulers to be rulers and the sons of subjects to be subjects. And the loftier view of education as self-justified soul-elevator still remains in our “useless” disciplines – present in every school even if teachers and administrators are ingenious

about dressing them up as useful ones – and in the weight given to literature in most schools (English being one of the only classes required all four years in most high schools, despite the unpopularity of teaching grammar). One commonality in all ways of understanding education, it seems, is that it is some sort of *cultivation*, whether of minds or of souls, whether for participation in self-government or for ennoblement of the spirit, for freedom from tyrants and the shackles of oppression or for freedom from prejudice and the shackles of oneself. To endeavor to cultivate in the minds of youth an appreciation for the power of self-cultivation is perhaps the highest aim of the educator, and when at his best all that he can do.

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