

Philosophy or Education?

¿Filosofía o educación?

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Philosophy of Education is a discipline that arose historically in the context of the endeavor to turn education into an object of scientific, rigorous knowledge. The main question that it should address is thus not “What is philosophy?” but rather, “What is education?” When the start is the first question, the discourse tends to focus too narrowly in on itself, on the problems of philosophers. The second question was the starting point for the movement that has done the most to consolidate this form of knowledge: the school promoted by R.S. Peters and his followers.

The first question often leads Philosophy of Education down a rabbit-hole by acknowledging the impossibility of ever finding a final and definitive fundament that gives meaning to education, an activity replete with contingency. The perception of this apparent failure may give rise to two equally unappealing ways out for education. One is to hide behind the alleged neutrality of a technological discourse that pushes aside any questions on the aims of education. The other way out is to retreat into a total skepticism from which any educational intent becomes suspect.

Especially at a time when the predominating discourse is that of performativity, there needs to be a return to education itself, in a kind of phenomenological U-turn. At this turn, education is discovered to be a form of relating with the other and with others. In contrast to the Herbartian attempt of constructing the pedagogical knowledge over the idea of a general aim of education, Dilthey stated that “die Wissenschaft der Pädagogik ... nur beginnen mit der Deskription des Erziehers in seinem Verhältnis zum Zögling” [“the science of pedagogy ... only begins with the description of educators in their relationships with the pupil”] (W. Dilthey: *Grundlinien eines Systems der Pädagogik*, 1884-1894).

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Education is a peculiar relationship of mediation between object and subject. It consists in projecting the world for the learner, but it is the latter, not the former, who defines the center of attention. This is why someone can be an excellent chemist or musician and yet be a complete failure as a chemistry or music educator. For a musician, the most important thing is, as it should be, the performance of the musical piece (the object). When that musician acts with educational purpose, the point of interest shifts, or should shift. Music education takes on meaning insofar as it in some way involves an increase in value in the person being taught (the subject), even if that means having to do without the exactness of artistic performance.

The contingent nature of the criteria on the increasing in value must not turn into a paralyzing condition. John Dewey said that Philosophy of Education “means the necessity of the introduction of a new order of conceptions leading to new modes of practice” (J. Dewey: *Experience and Education*, 1938). Philosophy of Education helps to see education as a deep, multi-dimensional reality, historical and ideological, not to delight in its contemplation, or in its negation, but rather to shed light on action. There is no possibility of delay when the starting question is education. The urgency of the task of educating obliges us to deal with uncertainty head-on, to acknowledge that “we should not look for skyhooks, but only for footholds” (R. Rorty: *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, 1991).