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# Introduction: Philosophy of Education and Philosophy

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# INTRODUCTION: PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION AND PHILOSOPHY

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## 1. WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION?

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PHILOSOPHY of education is that branch of philosophy that addresses philosophical questions concerning the nature, aims, and problems of education. As a branch of practical philosophy, its practitioners look both inward to the parent discipline of philosophy and outward to educational practice, as well as to developmental psychology, cognitive science more generally, sociology, and other relevant disciplines.

The most basic problem of philosophy of education is that concerning aims: what are the proper aims and guiding ideals of education? A related question concerns evaluation: what are the appropriate criteria for evaluating educational efforts, institutions, practices, and products? Other important problems involve the authority of the state and of teachers, and the rights of students and parents; the character of purported educational ideals such as critical thinking, and of purportedly undesirable phenomena such as indoctrination; the best way to understand and conduct moral education; a range of questions concerning teaching, learning, and curriculum; and many others. All these and more are addressed in the essays that follow.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. THE RELATION OF PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION TO PHILOSOPHY

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For much of the history of Western philosophy, philosophical questions concerning education were high on the philosophical agenda. From Socrates, Plato, and

Aristotle to twentieth-century figures such as Bertrand Russell, John Dewey, R. S. Peters, and Israel Scheffler, general philosophers (i.e., contemporary philosophers working in departments of philosophy and publishing in mainstream philosophy journals, and their historical predecessors) addressed questions in philosophy of education along with their treatments of issues in epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of mind and language, and moral and social/political philosophy. The same is true of most of the major figures of the Western philosophical tradition, including Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, Hume, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Mill, and many others.<sup>2</sup>

On the face of it, this should not be surprising. For one thing, the pursuit of philosophical questions concerning education is partly dependent upon investigations of the more familiar core areas of philosophy. For example, questions concerning the curriculum routinely depend on epistemology and the philosophies of the various curriculum subjects (e.g., Should science classes emphasize mastery of current theory or the “doing” of science? What is it about art that entitles it, if it is so entitled, to a place in the curriculum? According to what criteria should specific curriculum content be selected? Should all students be taught the same content?). Questions concerning learning, thinking, reasoning, belief, and belief change typically depend on epistemology, ethics, and/or philosophy of mind (e.g., Under what conditions is it desirable and/or permissible to endeavor to change students’ fundamental beliefs? To what end should students be taught—if they should be so taught—to reason? Can reasoning be fostered independently of the advocacy, inculcation, or indoctrination of particular beliefs?). Questions concerning the nature of and constraints governing teaching often depend on ethics, epistemology, and/or the philosophies of mind and language (e.g., Is it desirable and/or permissible to teach mainstream contemporary science to students whose cultures or communities reject it? Should all students be taught in the same manner? How are permissible teaching practices distinguished from impermissible ones?). Similarly, questions concerning schooling frequently depend on ethics, social/political philosophy, and social epistemology (e.g., Assuming that schools have a role to play in the development of ethical citizens, should they concentrate on the development of character or, rather, on the rightness or wrongness of particular actions? Is it permissible for schools to be in the business of the formation of students’ character, given liberalism’s reluctance to endorse particular conceptions of the good? Should schools be constituted as democratic communities? Do all students have a right to education? If so, to what extent if any is such an education obliged to respect the beliefs of all groups, and what does such respect involve?). This sort of dependence on the parent discipline is typical of philosophical questions concerning education.

Another, related reason that the philosophical tradition has taken educational matters as a locus of inquiry is that many fundamental questions concerning education—for example, those concerning the aims of education, the character and desirability of liberal education, indoctrination, moral and intellectual virtues, the imagination, authenticity, and other educational matters—are of independent philosophical interest but are intertwined with more standard core areas and issues

(e.g., Is the fundamental epistemic aim of education the development of true belief, justified belief, understanding, some combination of these, or something else? In what sense if any can curriculum content be rightly regarded as "objective"? Given the cognitive state of the very young child, is it possible to avoid indoctrination entirely—and if not, how bad a thing is that? Should education aim at the transmission of existing knowledge or, rather, at fostering the abilities and dispositions conducive to inquiry and the achievement of autonomy?).

In addition, the pursuit of fundamental questions in more or less all the core areas of philosophy often leads naturally to and is sometimes enhanced by sustained attention to questions about education (e.g., epistemologists disagree about the identity of the highest or most fundamental epistemic value, with some plumping for truth/true belief and others for justified or rational belief; this dispute is clarified by its consideration in the context of education).<sup>3</sup>

For these reasons, and perhaps others, it is not surprising that the philosophical tradition has generally regarded education as a worthy and important target of philosophical reflection. It is therefore unfortunate that the pursuit of philosophy of education as an area of philosophical investigation has been largely abandoned by general philosophers in the last decades of the twentieth century, especially in the United States. The 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s saw quite a few general philosophers make important contributions to philosophy of education, including, among others, such notables as Kurt Baier, Max Black, Brand Blanshard, Richard Brandt, Abraham Edel, Joel Feinberg, William Frankena, Alan Gewirth, D. W. Hamlyn, R. M. Hare, Alasdair MacIntyre, A. I. Melden, Frederick Olafson, Ralph Barton Perry, R. S. Peters, Edmund Pincoffs, Kingsley Price, Gilbert Ryle, Israel Scheffler, and Morton White.<sup>4</sup> But the subject has more recently suffered a loss of visibility and presence, to the extent that many, and perhaps most, working general philosophers and graduate students do not recognize it as a part of philosophy's portfolio.

The reasons for this loss are complex and are mainly contingent historical ones that I will not explore here. It remains, nevertheless, that this state of affairs is unfortunate for the health of philosophy of education as an area of philosophical endeavor, and for general philosophy as well. The "benign neglect" of philosophy of education by the general philosophical community—an area central to philosophy since Socrates and Plato—not only deprives the field of a huge swath of talented potential contributors; it also leaves working general philosophers and their students without an appreciation of an important branch of their discipline. One purpose of this volume is to rectify this situation.

### 3. THE CHAPTERS

The essays that follow are divided in a way that reflects my own, no doubt somewhat idiosyncratic understanding of the contours of the field; other groupings would be equally sensible. In the first section, concerning the *aims of education*, Emily

Robertson and Harry Brighouse treat the epistemic and moral/political aims of education, respectively, while Martha Nussbaum provides an account of and makes the case for the importance and contemporary relevance of liberal education.

The next concerns a variety of issues involving *thinking, reasoning, teaching, and learning*. Richard Feldman discusses epistemological aspects of thinking and reasoning as they are manifested in the educational context. Jonathan Adler offers an account, informed by recent work in cognitive science as well as epistemology, of the nature of fallibility and its educational significance. Eamonn Callan and Dylan Arena offer an account of indoctrination, while Stefaan Cuypers does the same for authenticity. David Moshman provides a psychological account of the development of rationality, while Gareth Matthews raises doubts concerning the contributions developmental psychology might make to the philosophical understanding of the various cognitive dimensions of education. Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith offer a nuanced account of Socratic teaching and Socratic method, while Amélie Rorty argues for the educational importance of imagination and sketches strategies for developing it in the classroom.

The third section focuses on *moral, value, and character education*. Michael Slote articulates and defends an empathy-based approach to moral education, while Marcia Baron defends a Kantian approach. Elijah Millgram focuses on moral skepticism and possible attendant limits of moral education. Graham Oddie offers a metaphysical account of value as part of a general approach to values education.

The next section treats issues arising at the intersection of *knowledge, curriculum, and educational research*. David Carr addresses general questions concerning the extent to which, and the ways in which, the curriculum is and ought to be driven by our views of knowledge. Philip Kitcher focuses on the work of Dewey, Mill, and Adam Smith, arguing that Dewey's philosophy of education has the resources to answer a challenge posed by Smith's economic analyses, and that philosophers ought to embrace Dewey's reconceptualization of philosophy as the "general theory of education." Catherine Elgin discusses the character of art and the centrality of art education to the curriculum. Robert Audi and Richard Grandy both address questions concerning science education—the first focusing on the ways in which religious toleration and liberal neutrality might constrain science education, and the second on contemporary cognitive scientific investigations of teaching and learning in the science classroom. Denis Phillips assesses extant philosophical critiques of educational research and discusses the scientific status, current state, and future promise of such research.

The fifth section addresses *social and political* issues concerning education. Amy Gutmann and Meira Levinson both address contentious questions concerning education in the contemporary circumstances of multiculturalism, while Lawrence Blum treats the problematic character and effects of prejudice and the prospects for overcoming them. Rob Reich investigates the moral and legal legitimacy of some varieties of educational authority, emphasizing the important but often overlooked interests of children.

The final section includes three papers that discuss particular approaches to philosophy of education: Randall Curren considers pragmatic approaches to the subject, Nel Noddings feminist approaches, and Nicholas Burbules postmodern approaches. All three provide useful overviews of and also critically address the promise of and problems facing the target approaches.

#### 4. BRINGING PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION BACK TO PHILOSOPHY

All of these chapters exhibit both the deep and genuinely philosophical character of philosophical questions concerning education, and the benefits to be gained by sustained attention, by students and philosophers alike, to those questions. Most of them are written by distinguished general philosophers; they reflect both a sophisticated mastery of the core areas of philosophy (to which these authors have made independent important contributions) and a deep grasp of the significance of philosophical questions concerning education. All of them exemplify the benefits to be derived from a fruitful interaction between philosophy of education and the parent discipline.

The time is right for philosophy of education to regain its rightful place in the world of general philosophy. And it is for this reason that I am especially pleased to have been involved in the present project. Happily, there have been some positive developments on this score in recent years, as well as some honorable exceptions to the general neglect of philosophy of education in recent decades by the community of general philosophers.<sup>5</sup> My hope is that the volume will further contribute to the restoration of philosophy of education to its rightful place in the world of general philosophy, by playing some role in furthering the recent rekindling of interest among general philosophers in philosophy of education: in their taking seriously philosophical problems concerning education, and in putting the latter on their philosophical agendas.<sup>6</sup>

#### NOTES

1. For more detailed depictions of the field, see Curren 1998b, Phillips 2008, and Siegel 2007.
2. For contemporary assessments of the contributions to philosophy of education of these and other figures, made by an impressive roster of contemporary general philosophers, see Rorty 1998. A fine brief survey is provided in Curren 1998a. Phillips 2008 (section 1.2) issues a salutary reservation concerning the philosophical significance of the educational musings of the acknowledged great figures of the Western philosophical tradition.

3. See Siegel (2005).
4. For a brief and partial indication of the level of activity, see Archambault 1965, Doyle 1973, Frankena 1965, Hamlyn 1978, Langford and O'Connor 1973, *Monist* 1968, and Scheffler 1958/1966, 1960, 1965, 1973/1989.
5. I briefly mention some of them in Siegel 2005, p. 345, note 1.
6. Thanks to Jonathan Adler and Randall Curren for very helpful guidance and advice on the penultimate draft of this introduction.

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