

THE PROVINCE OF PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

BY JAMES W. MERRITT

THE PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER IS TO INQUIRE INTO THE ONTOLOGY OF THE PROVINCE OF PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION. This is to say that I hope to demonstrate some of the rational processes involved in deriving conclusions about the nature of this discipline, its appropriate content, its methods, and the sorts of questions with which it deals. Scholarly interest in the problem of delineating the function of philosophy of education seems definitely on the increase, but while the past seven years¹ have yielded a fair number of articles explicitly addressed to this problem it should be noted that these recent writings deal not only with the nature of philosophy of education but also, with its aims, the methods of teaching and its reputation among other academic disciplines. There seems to be a marked tendency to confuse these latter questions with the primary question of the province of philosophy of education. I propose, therefore, to limit my attention for the most part to *what it is* and how we obtain defensible ideas on what it is. I shall also have something to say about the effects of this discipline, but I wish to emphasize from the start that the question of the province of philosophy of education ought to be treated as a distinctly different question from that of its desired effects.

An analysis of the question of whether this discipline should be called *philosophy of education* or *educational philosophy* yields a clue on its nature which is worth pursuing. Although both are sanctioned by precedent, I believe the former designator has more in its favor.

The choice between these two terms can be considered first in the light of their grammatical structure. 'Philosophy of education' is a substantive which designates a relationship of an agent (philosophy) to a particular object (education.) 'Educational philosophy' is a substantive containing an adjectival modifier indicating that our interest in philosophy is confined to that part of it which has the quality of being educational. Assuming that the purpose of the discipline is to denote philosophical investigations of educational problems we can argue that the adjectival form, *i.e.* 'educational philosophy', is appropriate by analogy with the traditional precedent of 'moral philosophy'—a term which fully denotes philosophical analysis of problems of morality. But while 'moral philosophy' denotes an open-ended philosophical inquiry into moral problems, 'educational philosophy' suggests a body of doctrine.²

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¹The reason for the choice of seven years can be readily apparent if we consult Professor Newsome's bibliography in his article in *Educational Theory*, IX: 2 (April 1959). pp. 97-104.

²Similarly the term 'educational sociology' refers to a doctrinaire approach to school and society while 'sociology of education' denotes the application of a particular social science to educational reality.

'Philosophy of religion' indicates that philosophical investigations are made of religious experience, but if one were to say that he is studying religious philosophy we would be inclined to suppose that his attention is confined to investigations or conclusions having religious qualities. An artistic (or aesthetic) philosophy would be one which has been artistically constructed, but philosophy of art means the application of philosophical methods to problems in understanding aesthetic experience. A scientific philosophy is one which obeys certain rules of science, but philosophy of science describes the activity of science. And *a fortiori* to ask for logical philosophy means that one desires that philosophical activity be in harmony with the rules of logic, but 'philosophy of logic' means the philosophical analysis of the derivation of systems of logic. Thus 'philosophy of education', meaning the philosophical investigation of educational problems, is akin to other established members of the family of 'philosophies of . . .'. Membership in this family implies that resources may be drawn from the whole body of philosophical methods and insights for the illumination of problems relevant to the object under consideration.

We have assumed that philosophy of education is the application of philosophical resources to the intellectual understanding of educational reality and problems. We can think of this postulate as a clue to the province of philosophy of education, but a clue in a detective mystery, however attractive, is not accepted as conclusive until it has been tracked down or fully investigated. In this paper we shall at least partially investigate the possibility that philosophy of education is what our clue says it is.

Just as no clue stands in isolation, our assumption about the province of philosophy of education must be weighed against existing contrary assumptions. The most obvious of these is that philosophy of education is the discipline which integrates all scholarly efforts to reform education and society. It is true that philosophy of education is concerned with fitting together existing or possible ideas about schools and their relation to society. But the philosophical interest is a critical, evaluating interest which examines ideas to test their tenability. Philosophy of education is not dedicated to the integration of ideas on school and society in order to achieve preconceived ideas of social reform.

Furthermore, the orientation to social reform is likely to unduly separate philosophy of education from other philosophy. Other philosophy does not exist for the purpose of reforming society. The belief that philosophy of education is more or less concerned with the reform of education and society might have the effect of 'outlawing' an interest in some general philosophy which is clearly irrelevant to the reform of society but yet capable of having profound educational implications. For example, a commitment to philosophical investigation based on reform might very plausibly serve to discourage an investigation of other philosophical works which happen to predict that society is doomed. The important point is that the reform concept is likely to discourage communication with philosophers who are not at all occupied with social and educational reform.

A second argument against the reform concept is that philosophy of education ought not to be denoted in terms of its effects. To derive the nature of philosophy of education by considering its desired effects in society is to postulate conclusions and from these conclusions set up a doctrine. This is quite different from open-

ended inquiry which is not only not committed to any particular pattern of results, but is not committed to producing social results at all. Philosophy of education is independent in the sense that it is its own reason for existing. Like all academic disciplines and like many civilized activities it is its own end. The effort to systematize rational explanation of educational reality is distinct from effort to reform education and society. The clarification of educational thought is a sufficient end in itself. Thus a description of the province of this discipline is not contingent upon the use to which its characteristic procedures and conclusions are put. As a contingent fact philosophy of education does have favorable social effects, but theoretically philosophy of education need not have any effects at all beyond itself.

The rejection of the concept that the nature of philosophy of education is determined by considering its desired effects leads to some thought about the choice of other terms for denoting its nature. To ask what is the *content* of philosophy of education is to request knowledge about the conclusions which have been derived. It is appropriate to use the term 'content' when interested in the subject-matter of the *history* of philosophy of education. The term 'realm' suggests a large degree of independence for philosophy of education making it appear quite unrelated to the rest of philosophy. 'Province' seems clearly preferable because while suggesting a large self-sufficient area of investigation it does not, like 'realm', suggest complete independence.

Just as social reform is an inadequate basis upon which to establish philosophy of education, so is a postulate of complete independence from other philosophy inadequate.

One reason for wanting complete independence is the desire to keep philosophy of education from becoming primarily an applied discipline in the sense that it can operate only through deduction from the conclusions of general philosophy. Close federation with other branches of philosophy, however, need not imply academic dictation.

Each branch of philosophy, including the five or six classically established branches depends upon each other for insights and procedures which lead to conclusions which are characteristically its own. Some sort of reliance on logic is inherent in all philosophic activity. Sound ethical conclusions cannot be made without taking some position in metaphysics. And nothing can be known in metaphysics without due regard for epistemology. Further, politics and aesthetics would be barren without the assistance of ethics and metaphysics. If such interdependence exists for the older branches of philosophy, it seems quite clear that the need for such interdependence applies with even more force to the newer branches, *i.e. the philosophies of*. Further, general philosophers are becoming more inclined to believe that exchanges between them and philosophers of education are likely to result in the enrichment of both general philosophy and philosophy of education.

The examination of the various existing philosophies of education is a legitimate part of the work of philosophy of education, but study of existing systems should be seen as groundwork for the continual growth and enrichment of the discipline.

Further, consideration should be given to the relationship between philosophy of education and practical activity in education. If we assume that the province of philosophy of education is not contingent upon its effects, this means that it is not the task of philosophy of education to solve practical problems. In particular, philosophy of education should not be confused with educational policy making. Specific policy, however apt or worthy ought not to be called philosophy of education unless it is accompanied by a philosophical analysis of its validity. Philosophy of education is not indifferent to practical knowledge. Neither should any form of philosophy regard itself as an ultimate form of human experience; it is simply a different form.

There is no need to ignore other academic disciplines just as there is no need to ignore other branches of philosophy, but philosophy of education is independent of academic disciplines and of the rest of philosophy in the sense that it must take full responsibility for defining itself and denoting its characteristic activity.

Expanding our previous assumption on the province of philosophy of education this definition is obtained: *Philosophy of education is the application of philosophical resources to problems of understanding actual and possible educational reality.* One method for testing a definition of this sort is to apply a group of rules on definition from logic and to note how well the given definition obeys the rules. Professor Broudy applies such procedure efficiently and convincingly in his textbook³ when examining his definition of education. I shall use here a different procedure, namely the explication of terms.

The term 'application' relates philosophy to education in the sense that a tool or instrument is related to the work it does. The expression 'philosophical resource' gives the philosopher of education freedom to be selective in his choice of philosophical methods and insights, and it avoids the suggestion that he must first settle the major disputes of general philosophy before it can be put to work for education. For example, if ethical philosophers dispute the definability of moral terms such as 'good' and 'ought', a philosopher of education might apply a knowledge of such controversy to *his* problem of understanding the sorts of moral responsibility, if any, which are inherent in the role of teacher. To say that he *applies* such knowledge means not that his activity is limited to the use of fixed logical procedures of deduction but that his familiarity with one type of problem enables him to be wiser about an analogous type in education. It seems quite possible that the educational context of a human relationship can frequently serve to disguise its essential moral nature. Surely we are justified in hoping that the philosopher of education shall be particularly adept in stripping away such disguises.

'Educational reality' seems preferred to 'educational experience' for denoting the object of philosophic attention because 'reality' is more inclusive than 'experience'—granted that some philosophers might insist that all reality is essentially some form of experience. Some forms of experience might be controlled by forces which aren't experienced at all, and I should not want to deny the philosopher's right to attempt to identify them and understand them.

³*Building a Philosophy of Education.* (Prentice Hall, 1954). Ch. 1.

A question naturally arises about the appropriateness of 'actual' or 'possible' as modifiers of educational reality. It is definitely suspicious to speak of *actual reality*; what else can reality be other than actual? But possible reality can be distinguished from reality itself, and the modifier 'actual or possible' seems necessary as a means of theoretically permitting the philosopher of education to inquire into possible forms which educational reality might take. 'Educational reality' refers not only to actual or possible educational experience but also to factors, forces, and other such reality which more or less directly control educational experience. The behavior of a legislative body debating integrated schools is an example of a force which does directly control the form of some educational experience.

'Problems of understanding' refers to the intellectual analysis of the meaning of concepts quite aside from practical problems. A philosopher of education might engage in the practical work of teaching or administering schools, but this does not mean that such practical work is philosophy of education. The primary function of philosophy of education as in 'pure' science is to extend the frontiers of knowledge.

It thus appears that our definition has some value because each of its major terms does some important work in denoting the province of philosophy of education.

My next procedure is to examine the definition in the light of a philosophical doubt that no definition of a complex entity such as philosophy of education will ever be completely satisfactory. Suppose, however, we were to insist that a definition of philosophy of education ought to be as perfect and as precise as a definition of a cylinder in the field of solid geometry. In relation to such precision our definition would have value only in that it points the way toward a more perfect version. But do we have outside of mathematics any sense of perfect definition even of such a well-known and easily recognized object as a horse. Suppose we are looking for a completely satisfactory definition of a horse, and the definition in the dictionary does not satisfy us because we feel strongly that there might be some creatures which are horses but yet do not fit the definition. No definition other than one formulated by a being possessing absolute knowledge of absolutely all horses, past, present and future, can ever be completely free of philosophical doubt. Our problem of the horse serves to remind us of the tremendous gap between having a thoroughly satisfactory mathematical definition of a cylinder and having an equally satisfactory definition of an object which we ordinarily feel supremely confident in recognizing. The gap between having a thoroughly satisfactory definition of a horse and a thoroughly satisfactory definition of philosophy of education can be seen to be large by considering the difference between recognizing a well-known object such as a horse and recognizing an abstract entity such as a complex area of intellectual investigation. In order to appreciate the complexity of the problem of obtaining a perfect definition let us imagine a philosophical dialogue. First, we reduce our definition to the symbolic form of S is P in which S represents the *definiendum*, 'philosophy of education', and P represents the *definiens*, 'the application of philosophical resources to problems of understanding actual or possible educational reality'. Next we ask a hypothetical philosopher of education whether we can trust the definition. It so

happens that we have selected a philosopher who does not have a better definition to offer. But in reply to our question he proposes that he can best explain his position by taking us on a field trip. So we set forth armed with our convenient symbolic language. From time to time he pauses and says, "Ah, yes, this *is* an instance of P. Now let me see; *yes*, it is also an S." After several repetitions of this occurrence we begin to feel strongly that some sort of an inductive principle should reward us and we say, "But isn't *every* instance of P also an instance of S? He replies, "So far, that has been the case, but we can't be certain. My work is to know the nature of S. I am able to say that S is P by virtue of my knowledge of S. Surely, it is not unreasonable to suppose that if we continue this field trip long enough we might come upon an S which is not a P or upon a P which is not an S."

We must always expect philosophical trouble with definitions of complex entities such as philosophy of education because it is inevitable that in our limited experience we cannot possibly know all the essential characteristics of such an entity. At one time it was believed that all swans must necessarily be white because no black ones had ever been reported, and it was no minor logical embarrassment when a black species was discovered in Australia. If such a logical error can occur with respect to criteria for recognition of a relatively simple fowl, we can be fully persuaded that the work of defining philosophy of education is fraught with greater danger and we are justified in regarding the establishment of a satisfactory definition as an open-ended task.

We can be certain that it is within the province of philosophy of education to formulate and examine definitions of itself. Such a conclusion is entailed by the premise that philosophy of education is an autonomous branch of philosophy providing its own ends. Holding the above definition it follows that the task of understanding educational reality includes attention to the concepts which form our explanations of such reality, and philosophy of education can be seen as the intellectual guardian of definitions and terms which provide the basic elements of thought about educational events. Other academic disciplines provide scientific data which contribute to the definitions of terms such as 'education', 'teaching', 'learning', and 'motivation of learning' but philosophy of education weighs the data and conclusions. In addition to the above another group of terms requires philosophic examination because these terms are used either in discussion or evaluation of educational procedures, *viz.* 'curriculum', 'subject matter', 'organization of learning', 'teacher pupil planning', etc. Thus, the province of philosophy of education is to examine philosophically terms which are *prima facie* educational in their denotation.

A second group of terms which philosophy of education examines consists of general concepts which also interest the general analytical philosopher. These are not only basic to thought in general but have strong educational relevance. Examples are: 'causation', 'explanation', 'verification', 'value', 'connation', 'moral responsibility', and 'intention'. The philosopher of education joins with other philosophers in pursuing the meanings of terms such as these, but his conclusions would ordinarily be limited to observations on their role in educational parlance.

Likewise, philosophy of education examines educational doctrines which are compounded from individual terms. Obviously the examination of an educational doctrine is more complex than the analysis of individual terms.

One way in which doctrines can be examined is through the method of confrontation which is a method which Socrates used in *Crito*. This method is to take a given doctrine and to note an apparently contrary one which seems to have plausibility. Doctrine A is confronted with doctrine B in an effort to learn the logical relationship between them. If A is true must B be false or can both be true? If both are true is one entailed by the other? An example of this method is that of confronting these two beliefs: (A) "The primary role of the education professor in teacher education is to help teachers adjust to the realities of public schools." (B) "The primary role of the education professor in teacher education is to foster educational thought which is sound academically." To pursue just briefly one line of confrontation, if there is a persuasive argument that someone else in teacher education, *viz.* a laboratory teacher, has the primary duty of helping teachers *adjust* (in the best sense of the word) to schools as they actually are, we would then have strong reason for believing that the education professor need not necessarily share that duty. Further, if it can be shown that (B) entails a full-time job, then we have good reason for holding (A) as false.

The mere process of drawing conclusions from the examination of doctrines entails the formulation of further doctrine.

Philosophy of education is concerned with the truth or falsity of doctrines given by other fields of inquiry within education, but it also formulates doctrine independently. This privilege can be illustrated by reference to the question: What functions, if any, ought public schools serve which are relevant to the reform of society? Educational sociology, theory of school administration, and theory of social studies instruction are also interested in this question, but the philosopher of education has the privilege of independently formulating a doctrine on this question—granted that ordinarily he would want to use the valid findings of other disciplines. Philosophy of education's unique contribution to this particular question could be in bringing to it analytic effort and the traditions of ethical inquiry.

Philosophy of education is sometimes thought of as the final court of appeal for the major controversies of a society. This could be true only if societies limited themselves to controversies which were essentially philosophical. With respect to educational controversy its role is to provide relevant philosophical findings.

The culmination of effort in philosophy of education strives to produce a comprehensive system which accounts for all factors or variables affecting educational reality. The success of such a system depends largely on the soundness of the preliminary work of examining concepts, definitions, and limited doctrines and upon the proper taking into account of all relevant knowledge which the arts, the sciences, and experience provide.

Thus far we have defined the province of philosophy of education independent of effects which it may be expected to have. Such a conception, however, does not mean that we may not expect teachers or anyone else to acquire something of value through serious association with this discipline. Since philosophy of education is an open-ended discipline whose results are subject to further scholarly revision, it is obvious that some students will pursue it with the motive of furthering

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should not frighten anybody. I am only suggesting that the ultimate questions of life and destiny should have some place in the educative program along with all the penultimate and lower-order questions which currently claim the student's entire attention. And ultimate questions are the kind which force us to ask ourselves whether our inner sense of worth is to gain recognition somewhere beyond this existence.

If we could somehow simply awaken boys and girls to the "need for ultimate recognition," to the idea that the universe does not respond obligingly to this need, and that when all is said and done we ourselves are the authors of the response this need must have through our own lives and works, then we should be on our way to a newer and, I think, higher kind of meaning in the education of the young.

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a career in the creative work of philosophy of education. Such students form an exceedingly small minority, and administrators of teacher education are more interested in knowing the effects which philosophy of education can be expected to have on the large majority of students taking it. Such an interest can be analyzed into two component questions: (1) What is the nature of that which a normally serious student can get? (2) What favorable results shall whatever he gets in turn have on his performance as a teacher? To answer the first question it seems reasonable to expect: (a) a significant degree of familiarity with the conclusions of philosophy of education *and* the relevant rational processes which have served to derive them as well as (b) some significant competency in philosophical inquiry into educational reality. The term 'significant' in each of these statements of expected outcomes serves to remind us that 'the good' which a student gets from this discipline cannot be expressed briefly in formulations which are entirely unambiguous.

What effects might these gains be reasonably expected to have on the performance of a teacher? It is possible that knowledge and skill in philosophy of education can have some sort of positive transfer with a teacher's work in making rational decisions. In particular there are opportunities to accept, to reject, to hold in abeyance, or to ignore various doctrines from among the many which impinge upon the teacher by virtue of his living in an era which is highly critical of both traditional and experimental forms of instructional organization. Surely knowledge of philosophy of education will reinforce some teachers' inclinations to be both intellectually independent and more intellectually responsible. The crucial factor, however, appear to be connative. Whether or not a teacher gets something from philosophy of education which he can 'take back to the classroom' depends largely on whether or not he 'really wants' to perceive the not-too-few parallels between sound philosophical reasoning and good practical judgment in a classroom.