Education: Philosophy's Blindspot *

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You might think it obvious that any list of topics worthy of sustained philosophical investigation would include education, along with mind, knowledge, language, morality and so on. Education, one would think, is a subject-matter of immense practical, real-world import that invites philosophical reflection, and that reflection in turn promises to illuminate not just education itself but some of philosophy's most enduring questions.

However, hardly any contemporary philosophers see things this way. Of course, most philosophers today work in institutions of higher education, and many take their teaching seriously and do a good job of it. So, they care about education in that sense. They just don't think that education matters as a subject of philosophical inquiry, and moreover, they take a rather dim view of those of us who do.

The distinguished philosopher Philip Kitcher is an exception that proves this rule, but it is noteworthy that in the preface to his recent book, *The Main Enterprise of the World: Rethinking Education* (2022), he laments that most philosophers think of the sub-discipline of 'philosophy of education' as an academic slum occupied by intellectual mediocrities who produce dull and unsophisticated work. Kitcher himself dissents from this view, but he is right that it's the prevailing opinion. Most philosophers are content to see philosophy of education as a backwater and are unmotivated to engage with it because they don't believe that education matters to philosophy.

Lack of interest in education is not confined to analytic philosophy, but it is particularly marked in that tradition. I was an undergraduate at Keele University in the late

1970s and a doctoral student at Oxford in the 1980s. I don't remember philosophers at either institution staging lectures or seminars on philosophy of education the entire time. It was only when I went to Russia to research the philosophical culture of the Soviet Union that I encountered thinkers who believed education to be of such critical importance in human life that no serious philosopher could fail to take an interest in it. Of course, that is not a distinctively Russian or Soviet view. Many luminaries in the history of philosophy have had things to say about education – Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Mill, Whitehead, and Dewey to name a few – and educational themes can be discerned in the writings of the later Wittgenstein, Iris Murdoch, and others, though this usually goes unnoticed and unremarked.

Admittedly, there was a brief period in the 1960s and 1970s when Richard Peters, Paul Hirst, Robert Dearden and others at the Institute of Education in London brought the methods of analytic philosophy to bear on educational issues and encouraged a number of prominent philosophers, such as Gilbert Ryle, Michael Oakeshott and John Passmore to explore educational themes. And in the US, Israel Scheffler at Harvard produced significant writings on rationality and education. But while this 'analytic philosophy of education' inspired important work, its influence on the philosophical mainstream has been minimal, so that now the philosophy of education is often considered something no self-respecting philosopher need bother with, something that should be left to suitable persons in faculties of education and teacher training (a misconceived attempt at delegation since many such schools have long since lost interest in matters philosophical, but that's another story).

Education and Humanity

So let me spell out why exactly education *should* matter to philosophy. The reason is that education makes us what we are. Human beings do not enter the world with their rational powers 'up and running'. Those powers are actualised in the child in a process of formation, or education in the broadest sense (the 'upbuilding' of a human being, as Kitcher puts it, quoting Ralph Waldo Emerson). This occurs through the acquisition of natural language and the conceptual structures embodied therein, through initiation into styles of thinking and reasoning, and the assimilation of communal practices that structure the normative landscape in which children must learn to orientate themselves.

Human individuals do not have to find the world anew; they are the beneficiaries of a cultural legacy, the appropriation of which enables them to relate to the world as an object of knowledge. This is true of every human child, though it applies equally to those who participate in any particular domain of knowledge. As philosophers, for example, we enter an ongoing conversation – to invoke a favourite image of the English philosopher Michael Oakeshott's – and we have the benefit of, or are hampered by, that which has come before as it is manifested in contemporary belief and practice. Education is the formation of reason, the vehicle of human possibility. Anyone who wishes to understand the ways in which mind, reason and knowledge are expressed in human life had better have education in view.

If this is so, then 'education' refers not only to certain contingent practices of knowledge transmission, but to a constitutive element of the human life-form. To see this, it's worth reflecting on what the American philosopher Michael Thompson in *Life and Action*

(2008) calls ‘natural-historical’, the kind deployed in biology textbooks, nature documentaries and natural history museums to characterise life-forms by saying, for example: ‘The wolf travels in a nuclear family consisting of a mated pair and their offspring, and engages in the cooperative hunting of prey, usually large, hoofed mammals and smaller animals’ or ‘In the mating season, the bull moose stops feeding for two weeks.’

It is important that such descriptions can be true of ‘the wolf’ or ‘the moose’, even though *this* wolf might be lone, and *that* moose might not fast. *The* dog is four-legged, even if Fido has only three. Natural-historical description is thus inherently normative: it describes how a creature of this kind *ought* to be. One who departs from the norm, such as poor Fido, is to that extent ‘abnormal’ or ‘defective’.

Since we are animals, natural-historical description of the human being should be possible. But can we, for instance, give a natural-historical description of what ‘the human being’ eats? The German philosopher Sebastian Rödl thinks not. Of course, we can say what the human digestive system can process. But an account of human food is a cultural-historical, not a natural-historical, undertaking. Human practices of food production, preparation and consumption show enormous variation across time and place, and any attempt to characterise them will take us swiftly into the history of horticulture, agriculture and animal husbandry, and into the cultural norms that govern what is consumed and how.

And it’s not just food. Human beings do not have a ‘natural habitat’ any more than a natural diet, and there are no natural-historical truths about the number of children human beings have, or how parental duties are divided, or the role the extended family plays in child-rearing, or about sexual preference or gender identity. And hence these practices are not governed by natural norms, deviation from which constitutes ‘defectiveness’.

This shows, Rödl concludes (and I agree), that human beings do not have a nature in quite the way that nonhuman animals do; or, as he puts it, relishing the paradox: a ‘human being has her nature not by nature’. We enjoy powers of self-determination that enable us to decide for ourselves what to think and do in light of what there is reason to think and do. This is what it is for a natural animal to be free. For us, the question ‘How should we live?’ is not decided by our biology but can always meaningfully be posed whatever constraints – physical, biological, historical, cultural – we may happen to labour under.

Reason and Education

In my view, however, there remains at least one natural-historical judgment that is true of the human: the human being is a rational animal, whose powers of reason are brought to actuality only through education. This captures the centrality of education to our life-form. The human child is born into a world in which reason is ‘externalised’ in so many forms – in spoken language, of course, but also in artefacts, in the written word and other media, in practices of enquiry, reasoning, teaching, and in copious forms of intelligent and creative activity. Children’s powers of reason find expression as they become at home in this world. But that doesn’t happen just by maturation. It’s possible only with the help of others. That’s why education is not a merely contingent addition to the human life-form. Education is reason’s vehicle.

With this in view, it seems obvious that education should matter to philosophy. And not just because education raises new and unexplored issues, but because it provides opportunity for a fresh approach to old issues that philosophy has traditionally struggled with. We start to see, for instance, that an adequate epistemology must recognise that the manner in which knowledge is acquired, communicated and shared is internal to the nature of knowledge itself, and that the metaphysics of personhood needs to countenance the *formation* of reason if we are to understand how rationality and animality are united in the human person.

To speak of education as the 'formation of reason' might seem to suggest a rather narrow, even elitist, focus on the cultivation of intellectual abilities – on interpretation, reasoning and argument conceived as skills of 'critical thinking'. This is not my intention. I believe we should work with a more expansive conception of reason's domain. It's not just that we must consider reason in the service of determining what to believe (theoretical reason, so-called) *and* reason devoted to deciding what to do (practical reason). We need to recognise that, in both the theoretical and the practical, responsiveness to reasons is not always the outcome of reasoning or deliberation.

Of course, sometimes we think our way to a conclusion about what to think or do. But often our response to reasons is spontaneous and intuitive, more like perceptual awareness than logical thought. It's as if we *see* the contours of the normative terrain we are negotiating and are moved accordingly. Musicians improvising together, soccer players perceptively running into space and interchanging passes, or artists creating 'in the flow', are no less navigating the 'space of reasons' than lawyers building a case, mathematicians setting out a proof, or financial experts weighing up the pros and cons of an investment strategy. Reason is operative in the former cases, no less than in the latter, even if the agents' reasons can be described only retrospectively, and then perhaps by their showing, rather than telling, why they did what they did.

So, the formation of reason includes far more than the cultivation of powers of reasoning. It concerns how we come to understand the boundaries of appropriate behaviour, in learning how to play and pretend, express affection and love, make friends, stand up for oneself, control emotion, moderate desire, and so on. It thus begins in such mundane things as learning to eat with a spoon and to use the toilet, acquiring good sleep patterns, and it is presupposed by all the multivarious, norm-governed practices that pervade human life.

Philosophy of Education

Philosophy of education is particularly well placed to make sense of this and to push back against the dualistic assumptions – between mind and body, the rational and the emotional – that pedagogical thinking has often inherited from philosophy. Such binary oppositions inspire educational divisions between the academic and the applied, the intellectual and the vocational, the mental and the manual, where the former of each pair is consistently valued over the latter. But with a more expansive view of reason, we can appreciate how intelligence is embodied in practical activity in a way that challenges these class-bound dichotomies and makes, not just for better philosophy, but for richer ways of organising educational institutions, designing curricula, and understanding what it is to educate a person.

Consider, for example, the concept of habit. Philosophers have rarely had much to say about habit, and what they have said tends to construe habits as something mechanistic and non-rational. Even Gilbert Ryle, for all his disdain for dualism, portrays a habit as an unintelligent pattern of behaviour established by 'drilling' (by which he means something like conditioning). But this does habit a disservice, because a great deal of habit informs intentional thought and action. Only consider 'habits of mind', which can surely embody intelligence.

In educational contexts, developing the right kind of habits is crucial: habits of studying, reading, listening, speaking, explaining, considering and reconsidering, and so on (here I have in mind habits that govern not just *that* one reads, studies or listens etc, but *how* one does so).

Once we grant that responsiveness to reasons does not require overt reasoning, we stand a chance of giving a more satisfying account of habit, which might in turn provoke serious educational thinking about its cultivation. It's not just that education should matter to philosophy. Philosophy of the right kind can inform and inspire education.

How likely is it that philosophers in the mainstream will wake up to education's philosophical significance? I think that the prospects are good, because many of the prejudices that inhibited philosophers from taking education seriously are on the wane. For instance, the robust individualism that dominated so much analytic epistemology and philosophy of mind in the previous century – a legacy of British empiricism and 20th-century positivism – has yielded to an intellectual culture that is able, and often willing, to entertain ideas about the social preconditions of knowledge and mind.

The field of social epistemology is now well established and, although its practitioners have been a little slow to interest themselves in education, it is easy to see there are fertile areas waiting to be explored. And in philosophy of mind, there is growing recognition that our mental lives are embodied and enacted, and that they extend beyond the skull – views that, properly developed, can be allied to the expansive conception of reason that befits the study of education.

Moreover, philosophers today are also more willing to engage in work that requires them to be empirically informed, and to value interdisciplinary and collaborative research, and this should make them more open to exploring the messy actuality of education and its role in human development. Another salutary development is the gradual erosion of the division between analytic and continental traditions of philosophy, enriching the terms of philosophical discourse and making available concepts, such as *Bildung*, that have no immediate correlate in Anglophone philosophy.

Of course, one of the reasons that philosophy disdained education was no doubt sexism. In the male-dominated domain of analytic philosophy, with its fondness for methods adversarial and gladiatorial, it can be no real surprise that attention did not alight on issues relevant to the nurturing and upbringing of children. Fortunately, the philosophical universe is less male dominated than it used to be and, though there may be a long way to go, its practitioners are now usually open to more constructive and less combative modes of engagement.

But other obstacles remain. One is the tendency towards narrow specialisation that infects so much academic research, including philosophy. This is particularly disastrous for the study of education, where we often find epistemic, metaphysical, ethical and political matters densely interwoven.

Another factor is that it is not unusual for philosophers to resent the time they spend teaching in educational institutions as a distraction from the real work of writing and research. So, making education an object of one's study might seem like a busman's holiday, and perhaps that contributes to the feeling that doing philosophy of education is slumming it. But such a view is hard to sustain once one begins to see philosophical richness in the everyday realities of teaching and learning.

I have made the case that education should matter to philosophy by arguing that education, very broadly conceived (as formation or self-development), is central to the human life-form, and by exploring some of the metaphysical and epistemic questions that come into view when one recognises this. I have said very little about the philosophical dimensions of formal education – schooling and higher education – and of course a good deal of work in philosophy of education is devoted to such matters. Indeed, those mainstream philosophers who have ventured into the field have usually done so to address moral and political issues raised by formal education.

One familiar theme is that schools and universities have a central role to play in any vibrant democracy, equipping students, not just with relevant knowledge, but with the tools to think critically, so that they can make informed choices about how to live and contribute to democratic deliberation.

Some have defended the humanities and, more generally, a broadly liberal arts education, not just for honing critical reasoning, but for opening up to students things of genuine value, educating them in what matters, and thereby giving them a chance to choose among ways of living that are genuinely worthwhile. Sadly, throughout the world, and conspicuously in the United States, the ideals of democracy are so beleaguered that such discussions look increasingly utopian. But they are all the more relevant for that. For what can protect us, our children and our children's children, from the post-truth world of alternative facts, the reduction of political discourse to lies, name-calling and abuse, from climate-crisis deniers, vaccine sceptics, and science-haters? What can inure us against conspiracy theories and the treacherous influence of social media? What can equip us to confront the injustices and evils of the past? Education – more and better – has to be a big part of the answer to these questions. That's another blindingly obvious reason why philosophers should take education seriously.

Education and Democracy

Education's relation to democracy is a central theme in a text I mentioned earlier: Philip Kitcher's *The Main Enterprise of the World.* This book is an exemplary contribution to the philosophy of education and deserves to be taken seriously. Kitcher combines a broad vision of the centrality of education in human life with discussion of many concrete questions about how schools should be organised, curricula designed and so on. The discussion is framed by the big question: what is education for? He argues that the way politicians and policy-makers

answer this question is usually distorted by economic priorities. They think educational institutions exist to prepare the young for the workforce, and thereby to contribute to their nation's ability to compete in the global capitalist, or more generally, economic arena.

But such an answer is myopic and, moreover, out of step with economic reality. With increasing automation and global outsourcing, there will be less and less desirable work to prepare students for, and the majority of tomorrow's workforce will find itself in service jobs. In the light of this, we must rethink our priorities. We need to recognise the value of service work and reward it accordingly. And we need to embrace the view that education exists to prepare students not just to make a living, but to lead flourishing lives, and to equip them for democratic citizenship. If there are ways that economic reality is out of kilter with this richer conception of education, then we should put education first and change reality accordingly.

Kitcher embraces John Stuart Mill's view that a flourishing life must be 'one's own' as it were – a life one has, in some sense, *chosen*. This means that we must educate for autonomy, so that students are enabled to decide for themselves how to live. Of course, we want to equip students not just to choose, but to make *good* choices. How are we to reconcile this 'perfectionist' sensibility with liberalism's reluctance to take a stand on where the good lies?

Kitcher responds by introducing a social dimension into his vision of flourishing. Individuals' life-projects should be freely chosen, but they should aim not just at personal flourishing, but at the flourishing of others, including future generations. Our lives must contribute to the human project by being to the benefit of humankind.

This view takes inspiration from John Dewey, and so too does Kitcher's conception of education and democracy. Kitcher – who, as it happens, is John Dewey Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Columbia University in New York – is inspired by Dewey's idea of democracy as a way of life. Because the institutions of representative democracy are prone to familiar failings, he endorses Dewey's conception of deliberative democracy in which inclusive, informed and engaged dialogue among citizens seeks outcomes that are acceptable to all, in a spirit of mutual recognition and respect. If such a vision is to be realised, children must be introduced to democratic practice as early as possible, so this must become part of the ethos of the school.

As for curriculum, Kitcher favours a broad general education in science and mathematics with specialised studies limited to those who are genuinely interested in pursuing science seriously. He also makes a strong case for the humanities, music, and the arts. Aesthetic experience, he argues, is a vital part of life but, since the range of such experience is vast, and individual responses so variable, students should be helped to find forms of literature, art, or music they enjoy and can relate to. Such attention to the interests of the individual learners is crucial to Kitcher's vision of pedagogy, so class size is to be kept as small as possible (eg, under 10 students) and teachers should be complemented by educational aides from the wider community, who can share their experiences, counsel, enlighten and inspire. As they mature, students should be helped to explore the diversity of human possibility through increasingly sophisticated forms of

history, geography, psychology and social science.

Just as democracy is a way of life, so too is education, and opportunities for participation in formal education – as students, teachers or as both at once – should be open to citizens throughout their lives.

Kitcher is aware that it would require massive social change for such a conception of education to become reality. In addition to respecting all forms of socially valuable work, we must do away with the obscene inequalities of wealth, eradicate the stereotypes and prejudices that are impediments to mutual recognition and epistemic justice, quieten the desire for the mindless accumulation of cheap consumer goods, and overcome the relentless economic imperative to maximise productivity. Only then can we have a 'Deweyan society' in which citizens, committed to life-long education, flourish in a truly democratic order where they devote themselves to finding mutually acceptable solutions to the problems, big and small, that confront them.

All this might seem utopian, but it would be wrong to dismiss Kitcher's bold vision as wishful thinking or revolutionary posturing. True to Dewey, his aim is actually pragmatic: to articulate ideals to enable us to move gradually from where we are towards something better. The challenge is not to build a utopia from scratch, but to solve a kind of simultaneous equation – since the creation of a society in which education finds its proper place itself depends on education – by steadily working towards the mutual rejuvenation of education and society guided by ideals that are open to revision in light of how things go. Kitcher takes heart from examples of the dramatic moral progress that has occurred in recent years, for example on such matters as gender equality and same-sex marriage. These are cases where beliefs, attitudes and practices that were once derided are now widely endorsed. If such moral progress is possible, then maybe the Deweyan society is too.

Kitcher's book makes vivid why education should matter to philosophy. Its publication is important for, when a thinker of Kitcher's stature turns to an issue, this is likely to attract attention. This will, I hope, stimulate new interest in philosophical studies of education. And this is all to the good, so long of course that those so stimulated do not think of the field as virgin soil but take an interest in what has already been achieved by philosophers of education.

Kitcher makes reference to a number of figures he respects (including Harry Brighouse, Randall Curren, Catherine Elgin, Meira Levinson and John White), but there are many others he might have drawn on. Not only is there much insightful writing on Dewey's educational ideas, but there are numerous philosophers of education who have fruitfully pursued many of the issues Kitcher addresses from a wide variety of perspectives. Consider, for example, René Arcilla, Nicholas Burbules, Joseph Dunne, Jan Derry, Megan Laverty, Michael Peters, Paul Smeyers, Richard Smith, Paul Standish, Harvey Siegel, Denis Phillips and Christopher Winch, to name but a few.

I do not mean to be critical of Kitcher. Given the breadth of his vision, and the amount of ground his ambitious book has to cover, he can only do so much. But to those he convinces that education matters to philosophy, I recommend they spend some time with the recently published *Handbook of Philosophy of Education* (2022), edited by Randall Curren, which presents a

fascinating array of philosophical inquiries into a multiplicity of educational matters, showcasing many of the leading practitioners; or the *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Education* (2009) edited by Harvey Siegel. These should leave you in no doubt that the philosophical study of education is not an intellectual slum, but a rather attractive and engaging city of ideas.

This essay draws on themes in my papers *'Teaching and Learning: Epistemic, Metaphysical and Ethical Dimensions'* (2020) and *'Human Nature, Reason and Morality'* (2021), both published in the Journal of Philosophy of Education. Some of the ideas presented here are developed at greater length in my book *The Formation of Reason* (2011), which takes inspiration from the philosophy of John McDowell, as well as the Russian thinkers Evald Ilyenkov and Lev Vygotsky.

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