

THE AIMS OF EDUCATION IN AN INFORMATION AGE

Trent Davis

What does Western philosophy contribute to our current understanding of education? More pragmatically, why should educators and students, and perhaps even citizens with an interest in education, care about philosophy? I want to put forward the case that philosophy, against the inevitable backdrop of life's ambiguity, can help us clarify the ultimate aims or purposes of education, and, further, that in our rapidly shifting information age this is necessary and even vital, especially if as a society we want to be explicit about the relationship between education and living a good life.

At the outset I need to admit that students new to philosophy sometimes rightly complain that there is really no settled agreement on either what exactly philosophy is or how it is best pursued. Despite its historical origins in ancient Greece, philosophy, as the old saying goes, remains its own first problem. The reason for this is that the sort of basic questions philosophers pose about the fundamental nature of reality by examining concepts like truth or beauty, inevitably provoke reflection on philosophy's own identity and purpose. The abundance of philosophical traditions and approaches is at least ample evidence that philosophers have remained very interested in what philosophy should be and how it should be practised.

According to Creel, however, despite these fundamental disagreements, one of the main reasons that philosophers have continued their heated conversation for so long, and new generations of students should be encouraged to keep joining in, has a lot to do with what he calls "*the ambiguity of human experience.*"¹ For something to be accurately described as "ambiguous" it has to be open to alternative and competing interpretations. The most important life experiences, such as the happiness of love, or the suffering of pain, can always be described and thereby examined in different ways from different points of view. Of course in a broad sense all of culture touches upon these experiences in some important respects. But the way that philosophers have found to address them, despite their in-house disagreements, is to utilize concepts and arguments with the goal of thereby enhancing their overall understanding of life. At its best, in other words, philosophy carefully examines aspects of human experience through an analysis of the relative merits of different views of what is possible and important, helping us live better in the face of life's ambiguity.

It is not an exaggeration to say that from the very beginning philosophers have wrestled with the ambiguity of lived experience that falls under the heading of "education," and that they have always been especially interested in its aims or purposes. For example, one of the earliest and still most significant philosophical texts, Plato's dialogue *The Republic*, opens with Socrates, Plato's real-life teacher, discussing

¹ Richard E. Creel, *Thinking Philosophical by: An Introduction to Critical Reflection and Rational Dialogue* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 30.

with the other characters the nature of justice. However, it is not long until they are considering the type of education that can best provide all citizens, and especially those who rule, with the wisdom to live justly. Plato's famous "Allegory of the Cave," which describes the educational route from ignorance to what Socrates calls an "enlightened"² state, has been a point of departure for philosophers ever since.

It is significant that in the introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Education*, Siegel claims that for philosophers working in the field of education today "The most basic problem of philosophy of education is that concerning aims: what are the proper aims and guiding ideals of education?"³ The endurance of the philosophical problem of "proper aims and guiding ideals of education" clearly remains compelling despite the long history of the discussion. What this suggests is that since education has become such an integral part of human experience today in the West, social and political changes continuously reanimate the philosophical discussion of education, and it tries to keep pace by constantly revising our shared sense of what education is and what purposes it serves.

Among these social and political changes surely the most significant has been in the area of science and technology. It has even become somewhat of a cliché at this historical moment to point out that we currently live in a hyper-paced computer age which provides unparalleled access to vast quantities of information. Yet it is hard not to feel that we have been overtaken by the sheer velocity of technological innovation which deeply impacts our shared lives. For a revealing example of what I have in mind here, Frodeman mentions a peculiar ad from IBM which boasts that every day research produces eight times the current knowledge housed in all the world's libraries.⁴ This extraordinary claim tells us a great deal about our contemporary cultural preoccupations.

Aside from the immediate problem of trying to imagine even just once the combined space in the entire planet's libraries, what the ad calls "knowledge" is actually raw data that still needs to be thoughtfully assessed and placed into an interpretive context. For this reason the IBM ad is deliberately misleading since it implies that having the right computer technology (which IBM of course just happens to provide) is somehow necessary to access knowledge in today's world, which in turn is then consumed by the user. However the end or purpose of such access and consumption remains mysteriously absent.

² Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Francis MacDonald Cornford (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1941), 227.

³ Harvey Siegel, "Introduction: Philosophy of Education and Philosophy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Education*, ed. Harvey Siegel (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

⁴ Robert Frodeman, "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity*, eds. Robert Frodeman, Julie Thompson Klein, and Carl Mitcham (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), xxx.

It turns out that even elite institutions are struggling with the aims of education today. In *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*, Kronman, formerly Dean of the Law School at Yale University, bemoans the hectic and superficial tendencies of education today. After leaving his position as Dean of the Law School, he decided to teach the humanities in Yale University's Directed Studies program. He justifies this career move and the importance of the humanities generally, by insisting that "Our lives are the most precious resource we possess, and the question of how to spend them is the most important question we face."⁵ For Kronman the decisions we make about how to live our lives are fundamental, but the implication is that the primary aim of education is to help us reflect on what it means to live a good life, so that in turn we can make such decisions from the most informed and even wisest vantage point.

As the shadow of this century lengthens and we are faced with ever new technological developments that will profoundly shift our cultural way of life, one thing will remain constant – we will need to keep revisiting the aims or purposes of education. Let us hope that the voice of philosophy continues to make its own distinct contribution to this discussion heard.

Biography

Trent Davis is an assistant professor of Education at St. Mary's University in Calgary, Alberta. His teaching and research is in the area of the philosophy of education. He focuses special attention on the schools of existentialism and pragmatism, and has a growing interest in the problems of epistemology.

Correspondence relating to this article can be sent to trent.davis@stmu.ca

⁵ Anthony T. Kronman, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 9.