

In G. L. Newsome, Jr. (Ed.), Philosophy of education 1968: Proceedings of the twenty-fourth annual meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society--Santa Monica, April 7-10, 1968. Edwardsville, Illinois: Studies in Philosophy and Education, Southern Illinois University, 1968. Pp. 1-12.

CAN THERE BE A NORMATIVE  
PHILOSOPHY OF  
EDUCATION?

(First General Session)

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1. *Negative Answers.* The complex question of whether there can be a normative philosophy of education does not have a simple affirmative or negative answer. We must expand upon the meaning of the question, draw distinctions, and delineate a position in any attempt to provide an answer. A good place to begin is to indicate major senses in which there can be no normative philosophy of education.

One such sense is that of claiming that the philosopher has special access to knowledge distinct from that of the scientist or the ordinary man, which will enable him to establish the fundamental principles of philosophy of education by special methods of knowing. Such a position goes back to the cabalism of ancient priesthoods. The priest is supreme and sacred because he has secret and special access to fundamental knowledge. Much of the great historical tradition of metaphysics seems to be a direct heir to this priestly tradition. In many parts of the world, there are still those who would maintain that the philosopher's proper role is to establish a system of metaphysics by special methods of argument and perception, including in such a system the fundamental principles of a philosophy of education. However, most philosophers in the Anglo-Saxon tradition would not take seriously such claims. This would apply to rationalistic claims of having direct intuitive access to principles of knowledge, as well as similar claims of direct intuitive knowledge of moral principles.

A more sophisticated argument, and one more difficult to deal with, is that there is one special preserve of knowledge from which at least parts of a philosophy of education would come; this is the claim that *a priori* synthetic propositions can be established. Although Kantianism is undergoing a vigorous revival, it is difficult to take it seriously in analyzing special areas of philosophy like the philosophy of education. Because I know of no philosopher of education who is concerned systematically to defend *a priori* synthetic propositions, I dismiss without further consideration the development of a normative philosophy of education with *a priori* synthetic underpinnings.

A third more powerful and more important line of negative argument is the claim that no injunctions as to what ought to be done in education either in teaching moral principles or in guiding child development for society's needs can be derived from purely factual considerations. The negative answer in this case is that from purely factual considerations or purely empirical evidence, it is not possible to infer a normative philosophy. The claim is that if we limit the grounds of philosophical principles to purely empirical matters, we can make no inference to normative principles. To do so is to commit the naturalistic fallacy. We shall have more to say about the naturalistic fallacy later, but let me say in passing that these claims concerning the derivation of *ought* statements from purely factual statements, which originate with G. E. Moore and which have been frequently analyzed by philosophers in this century, are seldom given a serious logical and semantic treatment in the context of an analysis of moral principles or the epistemological foundation of such principles. (Systematic logical analysis of these matters of inference under the heading of deontic logic is another matter.) Although the logical aspects of the matter have not been treated with any great depth or elegance by philosophers of education such as D. J. O'Connor or Alan Montefiore, there is considerable intuitive appeal to the claim that educators cannot derive normative principles from factual considerations without committing the naturalistic fallacy.<sup>1</sup>

Each of these negative answers I am willing to accept. To the extent that demands for a normative philosophy of education violate them, I am skeptical of being able to satisfy them. I say this, however, with one reservation. I am skeptical that a really firm distinction between normative and non-normative statements can be drawn, just as I am skeptical of drawing a like distinction between analytic and synthetic statements. The arguments that surround the naturalistic fallacy have received much attention. It seems to me it will be more productive in the near future at least to assign moral principles the rather indefinite epistemological status already possessed by general mathematical principles and many of the more general principles of physics. The axioms of a standard version of set theory, for instance,

can serve an important and fundamental role of organization and clarification of the structure of mathematics even when there is no clean agreement about the epistemological status of the axioms themselves. Similar systematic investigations of normative principles, as in the philosophy of education, should prove fruitful, even if there is continued controversy about the status of the principles themselves. This way of looking at the subject is expanded upon below.

2. *Affirmative Answers.* From another standpoint, to accept only negative answers to the question that is the title of this paper seems absurd. In some sense, even if it is not always a precise and clear sense, there must be a normative philosophy of education, just because practical decisions must be made daily about how education is to be organized, what curriculum is to be taught, and what the aims of the curriculum should be. We may wish to charge that the philosophy that dominates practice is inchoate or even inconsistent, but the charge that it is bad philosophy is distinct from the charge that there can be no philosophy of education.

Without trying to encompass all practical levels of decision-making in schools which involve some use of philosophical principles, it seems to me that there are at least three levels at which normative principles must be applied in education. The first and most general level is that of setting general aims of education. A useful catalogue of general aims has been provided by O'Connor.<sup>2</sup> Here is his list.

- 1 to provide men and women with a minimum of the skills necessary for them
  - (a) to take their place in society and (b) to seek further knowledge;
- 2 to provide them with a vocational training that will enable them to be self-supporting;
- 3 to awaken an interest in and a taste for knowledge;
- 4 to make them critical;
- 5 to put them in touch with and train them to appreciate the cultural and moral achievements of mankind.

Probably like most of you, I am not entirely happy with this list. I give it here only as an example of the kind of thing one can mean by general aims. It is not my purpose in this paper critically to set forth a more systematic set of general aims.

However, once a set of general aims is accepted, and hopefully on a rather explicit basis, the next requirement is to allocate the economic resources of the school system or other school unit to the various aims of education. The normative principles of allocation take us far beyond general aims of education to much more complex and difficult questions of relative distribution and emphasis. As yet, there has been little explicit discussion in education of these normative principles of relative allocation, but as I shall attempt to show later, the contemporary literature of normative economics and decision

theory can teach us much about how such principles can be formulated and what the difficulties of complete formulation are. My only point at the moment is to emphasize that normative principles are always at work, implicitly or explicitly, in decisions about allocations of scarce resources. Pious talk about general aims of education do not amount to much if the serious problems of relative allocation are not dealt with systematically.

The third and most particular application of normative principles that I would mention is the set of decisions about what particular curriculum to teach and what sequence of topics to follow within a subject, given a particular allocation of resources to that subject. Given a fixed amount of money to be spent, for example, on a mathematics curriculum, it is still a matter for decision and therefore for the application of systematic normative principles to decide what kind of mathematics our students should be taught. Even more serious and more controversial are similar questions about the kind of history or civics or social studies that should be offered to our students. Currently, difficult questions about the appropriate and proper emphasis that should be given to Negro history are at the forefront of many discussions. In many cases substantive decisions about curriculum can take place relatively independent of economic considerations and therefore their guiding principles need to be separated and given a distinct place among the systematic normative principles of education.

In my own view, too much of the philosophy of education has centered on problems of moral philosophy and the teaching of morality in the schools. This is a point I want to expand on.

3. *Non-moral Normative Principles.* Because the discussion of moral principles and the teaching of morality have dominated so much of the philosophy of education, it seems wise to give a very explicit emphasis to the importance, particularly the practical importance, of non-moral normative principles. It is essential not to be misunderstood on this point. In many cases of non-moral normative principles some minor aspect of moral judgment may enter, but the thrust of such principles is in general to be neutral with respect to moral questions and to be concerned with other normative questions. To ask what mathematics ought to be taught to students in the sixth grade is not really to ask a moral question, even though the sentence is an *ought* statement. The principles by which we attempt to settle the question are not generally part of what would be called moral principles. I realize, however, that some may wish to claim that at the highest level in these analyses, problems of morality will still enter. I don't wish to make a direct argument about this; there is probably a sense in which such a claim is correct. On the other hand, there are a number of normative principles which enter into the philosophy

of education and the systematic decisions that are taken by all educational units and systems, and which are not primarily or essentially moral in character.

Here are two very simple but concrete examples from my own experience. Because of the great importance now attached to reading, in some elementary schools it is customary to schedule most of the reading work in the morning when the children are assumed to be most susceptible to learning and most likely to pay attention to the teacher and the lessons. Social studies, science, and mathematics, which mainly means arithmetic, are taught later in the day, often primarily in the afternoon. The kind of inference and argument that goes into this decision looks something like the following:

- (1) The most important part of the curriculum should be taught when the students are likely to make the best progress in learning.
- (2) Reading is the most important part of the elementary-school curriculum.
- (3) Students are likely to make the most progress in learning during the first hours of school, i.e., in the morning.
- (4) Therefore, reading should be taught in the morning.

The one premise of this argument that is a normative principle is evident. One might, however, also claim that the premise asserting that reading is the most important part of the curriculum expresses in the indicative mood a normative principle, or at least depends on such a principle. Whatever the view of this matter, it does seem fairly defensible that in the ordinary sense of moral principles neither premise (1) nor (2) would be regarded as a moral principle, and yet at least one of them is a normative principle, and possibly both are.

I don't want to give the impression that arguments involving normative principles can always assume the simple form of the one just given. It would be useful to consider a slightly more complicated example to illustrate two points: first, that the argument is not necessarily deductive in character but can be probabilistic in terms of inference; and secondly, that specific evaluation of alternative courses of action is required and is a particular point at which normative considerations enter.

In this example, consider the administrator who is concerned to introduce a new reading program in his school system. He thinks well of reading programs A and A' but he personally favors A over A'. On the other hand, he knows that there are complexities in getting either program adopted. Two layers of reviewing committees are required and because of the many competing ideas in front of the committees, it is essential for him to pick either A or A' from the

beginning and to stick with it through the committee decisions if he is to have any chance of getting either A or A' adopted. He estimates the possibility that A would pass Committee 1 as at least p, which we shall write as  $P(A_1) \cong p$ . Also given that program A passes Committee 1 he believes that it has at least probability q of passing Committee 2, which we shall write as

$$P(A_2 | A_1) \cong q.$$

Also because of administrative procedures the chance of passing Committee 2 if Committee 1 is not passed is essentially 0. On the supposition that the hurdle of Committee 2 is the last hurdle before adoption of program A, we can then use the following probabilistic argument to estimate the chances  $P(A)$  of adopting program A:

$$\begin{array}{l} (1) \quad P(A_1) \cong p \\ (2) \quad P(A_2 | A_1) \cong q \\ (3) \quad P(A | A_2) = 1 \\ \hline \therefore (4) \quad P(A) \cong pq. \end{array}$$

A corresponding argument holds for the probability of adopting program A'.

$$\begin{array}{l} (1) \quad P(A'_1) \cong p' \\ (2) \quad P(A'_2 | A'_1) \cong q' \\ (3) \quad P(A' | A'_2) = 1 \\ \hline \therefore (4) \quad P(A') \cong p'q'. \end{array}$$

We can now see why explicit quantitative principles of evaluation are needed in order for the administrator to decide which program he should support before the two committees. Let us write  $v(A)$  for the value of A and  $v(A')$  for a'. The administrator may now express his preference for A over A' in terms of the greater educational value of A' by the inequality,  $v(A) > v(A')$ . Suppose however, that in terms of the probability of committee actions he believes as follows:

$$\begin{array}{l} p' > p, \\ q' > q, \end{array}$$

and so

$$p'q' > pq.$$

He is then faced with a delicate problem of evaluation because the expected value of program A is at least  $pqv(A)$  and the expected value of program A' is at least  $p'q'v(A')$ , and from the inequalities we have stated he cannot infer which program has the greater expected educational value. Quantitative principles of evaluation are needed for this purpose. The necessary normative principles of evaluation would not ordinarily be thought of as moral principles but at the same time they would be regarded as indubitably normative. I shall have some-

thing more to say below about quantitative principles of evaluation.

The point of these two examples is just to illustrate that in the context of decisions that must be made, a variety of normative principles, some major and significant, some minor and almost trivial, must enter into educational practices. Making explicit these normative principles is in my own judgment one of the major tasks of the philosophy of education, a task that has been unduly neglected to the almost exclusive consideration of general aims of education, problems of moral philosophy, and the teaching of morality.

4. *The Model of Normative Economics.* Analytical philosophers such as O'Connor and Montefiore have performed a considerable service in removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way of a constructive philosophy of education, to paraphrase a famous remark of Locke's; but as they both admit, it is certainly true that the contributions of contemporary analytic philosophy to the philosophy of education have been mainly negative in character. They have been of great help in analyzing fallacious arguments and in showing why in a relatively precise way vague ideas are indeed vague. But their positive contribution is almost negligible to a constructive philosophy of use to educators forced to make practical decisions at all the various levels I have mentioned. The situation, however, is not unusual. Exactly the same is true of the general domain of moral philosophy. In my own view, the reasons why this is true are intrinsic in the methods and approach of analytic philosophy; and if we seek to erect a constructive normative philosophy of education, we must look elsewhere for methods and models. Surely one of the best places to look is in the literature of modern normative economics, which has been very much concerned to make explicit and precise the principles of individual choice and social decision-making. From the point of view of this paper, it is important to be clear about the differences between these investigations in economics and the work in moral philosophy of the past two decades. The theoretical economists concerned with the normative principles that should form the foundation of economics and political theory have been little concerned with the epistemological foundation of the principles considered. Rather, they have given detailed scrutiny to their consequences and to the formal interplay between various sets of principles. As an example, consider the standard axiom that the method of making social decisions should not be dictatorial, i.e., according to the preferences simply of one member of the society. I cannot recall reading a single systematic epistemological discussion of the status of this principle. Economists have assumed that at least most intelligent readers would accept the principle. Consequently, they have been concerned to use it in a subtle way in its relation to other principles rather than to flay at the obvious and argue for its acceptance. As a second example,

consider the principle of Pareto optimality. Roughly speaking, this principle asserts that one social decision should be preferred to another if the first decision would lead to a social state in which everyone is at least as well off as in the second state and some persons are better off. In economic and political terms it is difficult to think of anyone's objecting to the soundness of this principle, although it is a relevant philosophical question to ask why we accept it or what more general principles might lead to its acceptance. My point, of course, is not to argue against the investigation of the epistemological foundations of universally accepted principles, but rather to argue that in the philosophy of education, as in moral philosophy, a balance now needs to be struck in the other direction. We need an intensive investigation of a wide range of principles in terms of their consequences and their logical inter-relationships, not of their foundations.

In citing these two examples it might appear that I am suggesting that it will be a simple matter of universal agreement to write down the normative principles of decision-making required in education. I do not wish to suggest anything of the kind and I emphasize that this is not at all the case in economics and political theory. Because we can get everyone to agree on Pareto optimality, it does not follow that a sufficient set of principles to apply on any broad basis can be agreed upon. We are faced with the problem clearly apparent in the principle of Pareto optimality: the principle is seldom applicable. In other words, the principles that can be readily agreed upon are not sufficiently discriminating to permit a unique alternative or even a small set of alternatives to be selected for adoption. It might be thought that this was always the situation and there was never any problem of having too many principles to apply. However, as the paradoxical consequences of various principles in economics and decision theory have clearly shown, our naive intuitions about rationality or justice are often inconsistent when we attempt to make them explicit. In other words, the set of principles we are prepared to adopt on a naive and unreflective basis is too large a set in the sense that no course of action or alternative before us is able to satisfy all the principles simultaneously. The existence of such paradoxical sets of principles is relatively new in philosophy in the context of decisions or the analysis of political theory, but it is an old story in the foundations of mathematics, where apparently obvious principles that all would accept, such as the axiom that permits us to form the collection of objects having a given property, can lead to a contradiction.

It is important to be clear about the kind of conflict of principles that is at issue here. It is an everyday matter in education for conflict of principles to arise among various groups interested in the



curriculum concerning what should be taught to students. Strongly held views on sex education, on the teaching of religion, or on the open discussion of politics can be found in many quarters. Such conflict is another sort of problem for the philosophy of education, not one that I shall consider in detail here. I shall simply remark in passing that adequate analysis of the conflict is missing from the philosophy of education just as it is from many contemporary theories of politics, which disdain any explicit concept of power. In the present context, however, the conflict of principles I have in mind is the conflict of principles within a given individual or social group. Revealing the implicit principles held by the individual or group leads to the result that the full set of principles is inconsistent. An examination of such inconsistencies can be, I believe, one of the more fruitful avenues of progress in the philosophy of education. Consistency of principles is a necessary condition that almost all men accept. It can be imposed and exploited without further analysis of the epistemological status of the principles. The close articulation of principles in the philosophy of education can have the kind of beneficial effects found in other philosophical endeavors, ranging from the foundations of mathematics to contemporary formulations of decision theory and normative economics.

In this sense, my appeal is for an old-fashioned philosophy of education, a constructive endeavor to supplement current negative efforts at clarification.

I realize that it may be well and good to call for such articulation of principles in the philosophy of education, but to leave the matter there is to leave the discussion very close to the arid plane of most general discussions in the philosophy of education. If we examine the particular principles much debated and argued about in normative economics, it is easy to see that these principles have a close relation to moral philosophy, and yet they have their own distinctive character and formulation. For example, consider the principle that the method of social decision shall not be dictatorial, that the choice between two alternatives shall be independent of the preferences for other alternatives, or that whenever possible, a Pareto-optimal action should be adopted. These are principles that make sense in the context of moral philosophy and yet have a distinctive political or economic feel about them. We should expect the same of normative principles of education. This point I now want to explore in greater depth.

5. *Antinomies of Education.* The antinomies of mathematics, ranging from Russell's paradox to the antinomy of the liar, have been a source of ever deeper investigations into the foundations of mathematics during this century. The philosophy of mathematics is indeed the one subject in which a very great and notable progress in phi-

losophy is apparent over the course of the past hundred years. In the last decade or two, antinomies that arise in normative economics or in rational decision-making have again been the source of many important and exact investigations. The existence of antinomies in education has not had a corresponding effect but has been the source mainly of acrimonious debate and polemic.

Here are four closely related antinomies of education that need far deeper analysis than they have yet received. For uniformity of terminology, I shall call each of them by the term that relates to the child-centered side of the antinomy rather than to the content- or the curriculum-oriented side. This corresponds in moral philosophy and epistemology to talk about the antinomy of freedom rather than the antinomy of necessity.

*Antinomy of Adjustment.* On the one hand, the principle is asserted that the school, particularly the elementary school, should be organized to provide the maximum amount of personal and social adjustment for the individual child. On the other hand, the principle is asserted that the school should be organized to provide the maximum amount of *achievement* on the part of the individual child. When these two principles are joined with some fairly widely accepted factual statements, an antinomy or contradiction is easily derived.

*Antinomy of Method.* The principle is asserted that in teaching we should maximize learning and problem-solving techniques independent of content, and selection of curriculum material should maximize student involvement and motivation. On the other hand, the principle is asserted that we should maximize the *content* of the curriculum in order to prepare students for specific jobs with specific skills or to provide them with a particular historical and cultural background. Dewey's *How We Think* is a typical defense of method, and the Hutchins' program of great books a defense of content.

*Antinomy of the Child.* The principle is asserted that the school, particularly the elementary school, should be centered entirely on the child and not on the curriculum. On the other and, the principle is asserted that the schools should at all times emphasize the *curriculum*, because teaching the curriculum is the proper function of the schools, while the personal development of children is the responsibility of other segments of society.

*Antinomy of Freedom.* The principle is asserted that the schools should endeavor in all ways to develop freedom of speech, thought, and choice. On the other hand, the principle is asserted that the schools should endeavor in all ways to develop a sense of *discipline* and criticism that satisfies the highest possible intellectual standards.

The existence of these four antinomies and others in the fundamental concepts of education does not mean that the daily business

of education cannot go forward. It can and it will, but their existence does mean that a first order of business for the philosophy of education is to formulate the foundations in a way that avoids any antinomies. In the case of mathematics, for example, the explicit efforts to avoid the antinomies of set theory have led to profound investigations into the nature of mathematics. What we still lack in education, in comparison to mathematics, is a set of concepts that are formulated with sufficient precision. However, the task is by no means hopeless. The recent clarifications of very similar problems in normative economics should give heart to all of us in education.

There is another aspect of the antinomies that is important. The acceptance of either side of one of the antinomies represents an extreme position. Most of us feel that the proper position is somewhere between the two extremes. Acceptance of a mean position leads to a rejection of simplistic extremism and simplistic ideologies of education. What is not sufficiently recognized by those who would tread the middle of the road is that we have not yet solved the more complex and subtle intellectual problems of formulating and establishing an intellectual foundation for that middle ground. There are a number of ways of illustrating this point. I choose a mathematical aspect of the problem. A compromise position between the extremes of any one of the antinomies will not be fully articulated until the explicit problem of optimization or minimization is solved. This is the problem of formulating the relevant concepts in measurable terms. How much freedom and how much disciplined inquiry? How much adjustment and how much achievement? It is only twaddle to talk about educationally viable solutions of any permanent value until more systematic and deeper analyses of the relevant fundamental concepts can be given.

I would like to try to illustrate the difficulties we quickly encounter by giving a deliberately oversimplified formal version of the antinomy of freedom. We shall assume only that agreement may be reached in judging whether one of two curriculum schemes permits more freedom of speech, thought, and choice on the part of the student. Thus I write  $x \succ F y$  to mean that curriculum  $x$  is more free than curriculum scheme  $y$ . A more refined system of measurement is not assumed. Correspondingly I write  $x \succ D y$  when scheme  $x$  is judged to contain or promote more disciplined and critical inquiry than scheme  $y$ . I write  $x \succ C y$  when the number of significant choices given the student is judged to be greater under scheme  $x$  than under scheme  $y$ , and I write  $x \succ L y$  when it is judged that more is learned under scheme  $x$  than under scheme  $y$  in terms of direct behavioral measures of learning.

The following postulates about the relations C, D, F, and L are then made, for a generous but finite set  $X$  of curriculum schemes.

*Postulate 1. The relations C, D, F, and L are transitive on X.*

*Postulate 2. The relations C, D, F, and L are asymmetric on X.*

*Postulate 3. The relations C, D, F, and L are connected on X.*

(This means, for example, that for  $x$  and  $y$  in  $X$  if  $x \neq y$  then  $xCy$  or  $yCx$ .)

*Postulate 4. If  $xCy$  then  $xFy$  for any  $x$  and  $y$  in  $X$ .* (This postulate says that greater choice implies greater freedom.)

*Postulate 5. If  $xDy$  then  $xLy$  for any  $x$  and  $y$  in  $X$ .* (This postulate says that greater discipline implies greater learning.)

*Postulate 6.  $\text{Max } C \neq \text{Max } L$ , where  $\text{Max } C$  is the scheme  $x$  such that for all  $y \neq x$ ,  $xCy$ , and  $\text{Max } L$  is defined similarly.* (This postulate says that the scheme with the greatest freedom of choice is not identical with the scheme with the greatest potential for learning.)

The Principle of Freedom says that we must choose as our curriculum scheme  $\text{Max } F$ . The Principle of Discipline and Criticism says that we must choose as our curriculum scheme  $\text{Max } D$ . It follows from our six postulates that  $\text{Max } F \neq \text{Max } D$ , and an antinomy of decision results, for our two principles of decision are in direct conflict. The system of postulates I have laid down is admittedly highly schematized and much too simple, but it does illustrate one fundamental point. It is relatively easy to lay down principles which are perhaps too simple but still reasonable and which lead directly to an antinomy. It is far harder to take the next step and indicate the explicit principles that should be used to select a curriculum scheme between the two extremes.

As I have already said, I do not mean to suggest that the everyday business of education can wait on an adequate analysis, but the first step forward in any domain of philosophy or science is to recognize in clear and certain terms what fundamental problems exist that are as yet unsolved. Clearly stated normative principles to deal with the antinomies of education are for me the most urgent need of contemporary philosophy of education.

1D. J. O'Connor, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (London: Routledge and Kegan, Paul, 1957). Alan Montefiore, "Moral Philosophy and the Teaching of Morality," *Harvard Educational Review*, XXXV (Fall, 1965), 435-49.  
2*Ibid.*, pp. 3-9.