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## FROM PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION TO PHILOSOPHIZING ABOUT EDUCATION

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In the nineteenth century, prominent educators sought the answers to educational questions in philosophic systems. For example, before his death in 1906, William Torrey Harris, United States Commissioner of Education and president of the National Education Association, published almost 500 papers about education. Although Harris wrote about a wide range of topics such as the proper curriculum for elementary schools, the validity of manual training, or the benefits of textbooks, he did not look for answers in empirical studies or surveys of educators' opinions. Instead, Harris found his answers in the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, when a group of educators rose to challenge Harris's conception of the curriculum at a NEA meeting in 1895, they based their ideas on the views of a rival philosopher, Johann Friedrich Herbart.<sup>2</sup> In an effort to resolve the controversy, John Dewey sought to find a way to ameliorate the differences of opinions by relying on the philosophic perspective that came to be known as pragmatism.<sup>3</sup>

By the beginning of the twentieth century, educators turned to science rather than to philosophy to decide educational questions. For example, in 1911, G. Stanley Hall complained that, twenty-five years earlier, education was based on what he called the sonorous metaphysical platitudes of Harris who had acquired almost papal authority among educators. Hall expressed relief that what he called the child study movement had provided the means for school teachers to tailor their lessons to fit the development of the child.<sup>4</sup>

Despite Hall's enthusiasm for science, philosophy did not disappear. Instead, during the twentieth century, philosophers took a more realistic direction. For example, noting that a new type of philosopher had taken over the chairs of philosophy in America, George Santayana tried to explain to the British Academy the nature of philosophic opinion in the United States in 1918. In previous generations, during the nineteenth century, the philosophers were religious leaders, he said. In the early twentieth century, though, the philosophers in the United States had the minds of engineers and social reformers. Although Santayana found them steeped in German idealism, he noted that they had turned metaphysics into a science of psychology with hopes that they could use it to improve the world.<sup>5</sup>

Since science and philosophy intermingled, learned societies of education, such as the National Society for the Study of Education (NSSE), tried to provide educators with surveys of the various philosophic views of education. In this spirit, the NSSE selected *Philosophies of Education* as the topic of the yearbook for 1942, and the yearbook committee invited leading philosophers of education

to explain their points of view. While the committee considered this effort to be a success, the NSSE decided in 1955 to approach the topic of philosophy of education from another direction. This time, the yearbook committee invited experts in general philosophy to write about education. The committee hoped that these authors would hold a wider range of views and that their essays would be grounded in broader topics than those written by philosophers of education had been.<sup>6</sup>

One of the philosophers that the NSSE yearbook committee invited to contribute was Jacques Maritain. Born in Paris in 1882, Maritain was a professor of philosophy at Princeton University. He had attended the Sorbonne, converted to Catholicism, and become famous for his work on St. Thomas Aquinas. It was his view of Thomism that he explained in the yearbook.

The article for the NSSE yearbook was not Maritain's first effort to describe his views on education. In 1943, Maritain had delivered the Terry Lectures at Yale University. The war against Nazism was in progress, and Maritain claimed that Hitler had instituted what Maritain called an education for death. Consequently, Maritain considered the question of the appropriate education for a democracy to be a pressing matter. Ironically, Maritain did not concentrate on the threat that fascist tendencies posed to education for democracy. Instead, Maritain ended his lectures with the warning that educators stood at the crossroads where they would have to choose between a humanistic education based on tradition or an instrumentalist, pragmatic perspective. If educators did not follow the path leading to the humanistic model, the resulting education would not be suited to the dignity and freedom of human beings. Thus, the enemy's ways of thinking would win even though Germany was going to lose the war.<sup>7</sup>

When the Terry lectures were printed as *Education at the Crossroads*, the book became Maritain's most widely known education text. It remains in print more than a half century later. In part, its continued popularity is based on the fact that it offered a direct challenge to the prevailing views of the need to base the curriculum on scientific studies to determine how students learn and what they should study. According to Maritain, science could not determine what education should do for students. The aim of education was determined by considering philosophic or religious ideas, he argued. Unfortunately, he added, the philosophic views most educators followed in the United States were those of Dewey. Maritain contended that Dewey's ideas encouraged people to ignore the religious or idealistic conceptions of humankind. When people turned to scientists for the answers about the nature or destiny of human beings, the answers would be stripped of metaphysical insights. Science could not answer anything about the nature of human beings or how to enhance their dignity because questions of how to shape the human person eluded scientific study, he concluded.<sup>8</sup>

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Before Maritain died in 1973, philosophers of education moved away from efforts to use metaphysics to answer questions about the appropriate curriculum or the aims of education. In recognition of this change the NSSE yearbook committee in 1972 asked philosophers of education to use their skills of analysis and logic to illuminate problems of educational research. While the volume clarified several questions for educators engaged in scientific studies, it could not give a view of the special benefits that could come from philosophic studies. Consequently, in 1981, when the NSSE yearbook committee considered philosophy of education, the yearbook committee asked experts trained in philosophy of education to examine the educational issues in such areas as aesthetics, ethics, and the philosophy of science. According to Jonas Soltis, the yearbook committee made this change in recognition of the fact that philosophers of education no longer tried to construct unified sets of beliefs about reality and education. Soltis added that philosophers engaged in philosophizing instead of building philosophies.<sup>9</sup>

The 1981 yearbook was the last one that the NSSE dedicated to the philosophy of education. Although the NSSE continued to publish the work of philosophers of education, the yearbook editors asked philosophers of education to contribute articles that analyzed a variety of subjects.

While philosophers turned away from efforts to build unified sets of beliefs, educators continued to ask about such things as the appropriate aim of education, its relation to the nature of the subject matter, and the appropriate methods to shape the human being. Since philosophers no longer approached these questions systematically, scientists offered answers to these questions. For example, in 1986, as if to fulfill Maritain's prediction, Mary Field Belenky and a group of psychologists sought to use science to determine the appropriate method of teaching and the correct curriculum to aid the development of women. Interviewing a total of 135 women from a range of social classes for periods that ranged from two to five hours, the researchers found that women appeared to pass through five stages of knowing. Borrowing a system of scoring developed by William Perry at Harvard in 1970, Belenky and her colleagues determined that women moved from silence to received knowledge, to subjective knowledge, to procedural knowledge, and finally to constructed knowledge. Thus, without referring to metaphysics, these psychologists used the information they claimed to have found in their interviews to describe how teachers could help women shape themselves into the form that women should take.<sup>10</sup>

The differences between these perspectives were considerable. On the one hand, in his book, Maritain began his investigation with a definition of humankind. From this metaphysical image, he determined what should be the aim of education, the role of the teacher, and the appropriate curriculum. On the other hand, Belenky and her colleagues mapped out the stages through which women said they passed, arranged those stages in what appeared to them to be a hierarchal order, and asked what methods of teaching facilitated these changes.

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Since they saw the movement through the stages as the aim of education, the methods of teaching that appeared to facilitate such movement became the role of the teacher, and the topics that such teachers covered became the appropriate subject matter.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, while Maritain based his views on his study of metaphysics, Belenky and her colleagues read over the results of their interviews to arrive at their answers. A comparison of the ways each perspective treated the aim of education, the role of the teacher, and the conception of the subject matter might make these differences clearer.

#### AIM OF EDUCATION

Although Maritain was a theologian, he did not call for a Catholic education. Instead, he claimed that education should enable human beings to determine themselves. Paradoxically, this was done by providing the children with the discipline that came from tradition. Rather than expecting children to accept the discipline, Maritain thought that the students would strengthen themselves by struggling against tradition, and their efforts to be free would enrich the traditions.<sup>12</sup>

For Maritain, the traditions came from what he called the Greek, Jewish, Christian idea of human beings that was the basis of western culture. This was the notion that humans were endowed with reason. Their supreme dignity was in the intellect. Since they were free, they were in personal relation with God, and their righteousness consisted in voluntarily obeying the law of God. Although called to divine life, human beings were sinful and wounded creatures whose perfection consisted in love.<sup>13</sup>

Since Maritain contended that the supreme dignity of human beings was in their intellect, the aim of education was to nurture the intellect. Thus, schools and colleges should concentrate on knowledge and the intellect. Although there was no guarantee that knowledge would lead to wisdom, this was the ultimate goal, Maritain argued.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, Belenky and her colleagues contended that the interviews they had with different women revealed that women suffered under male sexism. Families were patriarchal; institutions such as colleges were designed in accord with male perspectives; and many women of all social classes claimed that men sexually abused them. As a result, women did not learn that they were capable of intelligent thought. Although this low self image was most apparent among the least educated women who remained silent, it appeared among women who attended college and had rich opportunities in life.<sup>15</sup>

Belenky and her colleagues borrowed their view of the aim of education from Lawrence Kohlberg. In 1972, he had argued that teachers should help students move toward more mature stages of intellectual, epistemological, and ethical development. Although Belenky and her colleagues argued that

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women did not move in the same directions as did men, they agreed that women followed a set of stages that moved from immature reactions such as silence to more mature perceptions such as connected knowing. Thus, they modified Kohlberg's view by concluding that a proper aim of education was to aid the development of women.<sup>16</sup>

#### ROLE OF THE TEACHER

Since Maritain's the definition of human beings implied that individuals had internal or native capacities, he argued that these tendencies provided the propelling force for education. Although Maritain considered teachers to be important, they were secondary agents in the same manner that medical doctors helped the body heal itself. Thus, for Maritain, teachers had to act as guides or secondary agents who recognized and nurtured what he called the fundamental dispositions of the students such as their love of truth and their desires to cooperate with other people. For example, in asking a youth to read a book, the teacher was to help the student undertake a struggle with the internal world of an author. This meant that teachers had to avoid giving facts or information. He added that teachers should avoid textbooks as a plague. Most important, Maritain contended that teachers should not fight evil by punishing the children. They should advance the good by nurturing the affection for beauty that was within the children.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, Belenky and her colleagues decided that the appropriate role of the teacher came from what they believed they had found in the interviews about the special nature of women. Although some researchers had noted that men thrived in situations where they were challenged, Belenky and her colleagues believed that women had to be confirmed or welcomed before they could be challenged. For example, during the interviews, many women showed a dislike of adversarial relations. These women complained that people treated them as if they were stupid, and, as a result, they doubted themselves. Although these women disliked teachers who appeared to have no expectations or guidelines for the students, they wanted the freedom to find their own ways. Therefore, Belenky and her colleagues suggested that one way for a school to meet these conflicting expectations was for one group of people to teach and a different group to conduct assessment.<sup>18</sup>

When Belenky and her colleagues described the role of the teacher, they took a model of teaching that Paulo Freire designed to lead to social reform and turned it to serve therapeutic aims. The benefit that Belenky and her colleagues found in Freire's method of problem posing was that Freire asked the teacher and students to construct the truth through sharing and consensus building. To Belenky, this differed from what she called the masculine adversary style of discourse more common in universities, and, thereby, Freire turned the teacher into a sort of midwife. In the problem-posing style, the teacher and the students talked about an object of knowledge; they worked through a process of dialogue based on trusting the students' abilities to think. In this model, Belenky and her

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colleagues decided, the teacher tried to enter into the students' perspectives. Seeing that their views were valued, the students expanded their cognitive development.<sup>19</sup>

#### CONCEPTION OF SUBJECT MATTER

Maritain and Belenky had different conceptions of the subject matter. Since Maritain believed that children passed through different stages of mental development, he contended that the appropriate subject matter varied from stage to stage. For example, young children should be exposed to beauty with limited efforts to tame their imaginations. Since adolescents sought to use their reason to seek truth and justice, the meaning of science or literature should be the focus rather than technical considerations about laboratory measurements or plot structure.<sup>20</sup>

Although Maritain contended that some subjects with play-value, such as gardening, were essential aspects of life and taught important skills such as muscular dexterity, he warned that these play activities could take the place of subjects filled with what he called knowledge-value. This would be a problem because Maritain believed that schools should teach knowledge of those things that are richest in truth and intelligibility. These were found in such subjects as grammar and philology, logic, and mathematics. Not only would these subjects be found in colleges, but every one would attend college for a period of four years between the ages of sixteen to nineteen. To Maritain, such an arrangement served a social order fitted to the common dignity of humanity. After college, at age nineteen, the students could go on to advanced studies, vocational training, or work.<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, the women who Belenky and her colleagues interviewed received their educations from many different sources. In some cases, their education came from health clinics where they sought aid for their children. In trying to understand what their children needed, they learned that they could understand and apply the work of experts. In other cases, the responsibilities of family life led the women to develop confidence in their own abilities.<sup>22</sup>

When Belenky and her colleagues considered schools, the important lesson the women had to learn was that all knowledge is constructed and the knower was part of known. Thus, instead of seeing science as a collection of truths determined by experts, these women came to recognize that scientists offered models that simplified the world in order to understand it. At the same time, the women who had advanced to the highest level of constructed knowledge were interested in material and ideas that improved the lives of all people. Thus, they sought work in such areas as human services, psychotherapy, and education.<sup>23</sup>

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CONCERNS RAISED BY THE SHIFT TOWARD PHILOSOPHIZING

When Maritain complained that Americans ignored idealistic explanations of education, he affirmed the observation that Santayana had made over twenty years earlier. Although Soltis used the term “philosophizing” to describe the tendency of philosophers of education to help researchers clarify their studies of educational processes, his observations suggested that Santayana’s perception had been correct.

Of course, the philosophy of education did not disappear. For example, in 1984, when Nel Noddings published *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics*, she created a systematic conception of education. Furthermore, the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development and the Teacher Education Accreditation Commission adopted her perspective and encouraged educators to utilize her observations.

At the same time, Belenky and her co-authors were not innovators when they used their research to determine the aim of education, the role of the teacher, and the appropriate subject matter. Other researchers had done the same. For example, in 1911, G. Stanley Hall claimed he started a science of education and that scientific studies would uncover the laws by which children developed. Hall thought he could determine how children developed by distributing questionnaires to teachers, principals, and superintendents around the country asking them about such subjects as children’s fears. From this information, he wanted to map the children’s growth and determine what children should study and how teachers should conduct classes to facilitate that development. Although this method appeared impersonal and objective, he could not create the science he wanted to initiate. Hall received fragmentary, inconclusive information that he supplemented with personal reminiscences. As a result, few psychologists built studies on his findings.<sup>24</sup>

Despite these caveats, the preceding comparison of Maritain’s ideas and those of Belenky and her co-authors illuminated three problems worthy of consideration. The first of these is that if fields such as metaphysics no longer influence education, the questions about the aims of education, the role of the teacher, and the appropriate curriculum that were served by these thoughts will remain. The result might be that other scholars or scientific researchers will expand their conclusions to provide answers.

In 1974, G. Max Wingo raised a similar warning. Although Wingo believed that philosophers were not to only people who could answer the fundamental policy question of the aims of education, he recommended that philosophers of education take active roles in considering what the aim should be because this was a normative issue. He claimed that the then popular tendency of philosophers to pursue what he called analysis of language caused philosophers of education to ignore this fundamental issue. At the same time, he complained about researchers publishing slippery arguments with emotive

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statements disguised as facts that they claimed showed the proper aim of education.<sup>25</sup>

The second issue raised by a decline in investigations of education based on metaphysics is that the scientists who discuss fundamental philosophic issues reach beyond their evidence. In this regard, the work of Belenky and her colleagues is illuminating. It seems reasonable to ask if a series of 135 interviews provided a reasonable basis for sweeping statements about the purpose of education, the role of the teacher, and the appropriate curriculum. For example, the researchers noted that as the women advanced in their development they came to realize that all knowledge is constructed. It is hard to know how the interviews informed the researchers that constructivism was true.

In 2000, the NSSE committee dedicated its yearbook to the issue of constructivism. Writing a reexamination of the arguments about constructivism, Nicholas C. Burbules noted that the term had been widely accepted in educational circles. Although he acknowledged that all human knowledge had to be constructed in some sense for human beings to know it, he noted that there was little agreement as to what this meant. More important, he contended that educators raised many issues they could not resolve by linking constructivism to certain teaching techniques. He added that they need not resolve these issues to introduce the open-ended liberating methods of teaching most constructivists favor. For example, he suggested that constructivists sought to reproduce in classrooms the conditions that led to the creation of scientific knowledge. Although he saw the introduction of laboratory methods in science as a good thing, it was not because he knew children learned science in the same way that it had been constructed. This was the point many constructivists made. Instead, Burbules claimed children should follow laboratory methods because he believed that learning how scientists work was an important but distinct educational goal.<sup>26</sup>

The final issue is whether building educational ideas on scientific studies enhances the inclusion of diverse peoples. On the one hand, Maritain did not object to the fact that he could not reach beyond a western model of education. He began by acknowledging that education should shape the child to fit a particular culture. By love of paradox, he held the view that people should immerse themselves in a culture in order to become free. On the other hand, Belenky and her colleagues shared a more contemporary view that teachers should help students understand their culture and learn to reshape it in the direction of being inclusive. The problem is that Belenky's approval of the methods used by critical pedagogues influenced by Freire might frustrate such an aim. For example, C.A. Bowers complained that critical pedagogy imposed a western model of thought on every culture. According to Bowers, the basis of critical pedagogy was rational problem solving; however, some indigenous or nonwestern cultures use different models of thought. Thus, Bowers concluded

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that the critical pedagogues would impose a foreign way of thinking on these indigenous peoples without realizing or acknowledging it.<sup>27</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

A survey of the yearbooks published by the National Society for the Study of Education in the twentieth century indicates that philosophers of education changed the direction of their work. In the nineteenth century, educators turned to philosophers for answers to questions about the aim of education. As the twentieth century advanced, philosophers of education moved away from this type of endeavor, and people tended to look to scientific research for such answers. As many philosophers warned, scientists ignored many of the complex problems that traditional philosophers had considered. Thus, philosophers of education must take care if they decide to ignore traditional metaphysical analyses because they will have difficulty considering profound educational issues that science cannot approach.

#### NOTES

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