

Philosophy and education

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In the Middle Works Period (1899-1924) Dewey focuses on the relationship between education, society and democracy and this perspective will lead him to explore the educational function of philosophy for both individuals and communities.

Significant milestones are *The School and the Society*, *The Child and the Curriculum*, the essay *Philosophy and American National life* (MW, 3).

In *The School and the Society* Dewey points out that one of the factors that determines the “waste” of educational systems is the separation into parts of the different areas and aims of education; the result is that “*just as the parts are separated, so do the ideals differ --moral development, practical utility, general culture, discipline, and professional training. These aims are each especially represented in some distinct part of the system of education; and with the growing interaction of the parts, each is supposed to afford a certain amount of culture, discipline, and utility. But the lack of fundamental unity is witnessed in the fact that one study is still considered good for discipline, and another for culture; some parts of arithmetic, for example, for discipline and others for use; literature for culture; grammar for discipline; geography partly for utility, partly for culture; and so on. The unity of education is dissipated, and the studies become centrifugal; so much of this study to secure this end, so much of that to secure another, until the whole becomes a sheer compromise and patchwork between contending aims and disparate studies*”. (MW,1, 55).

Indeed, if studies are proposed as separated parts and pieces of human knowledge they are not consistent to the inner structure of the experience which has produced that knowledge, in a very different articulation and form.

In these terms, they will not have an educational impact on individuals and society.

But if we consider education as strictly related to human experience, all studies proposed within educational contexts have to be by necessity correlated and therefore “*if the school is related as a whole to life as a whole, its various aims and ideals--culture, discipline, information, utility--cease to be variants, for one of which we must select one study and for another another. The growth of the child in the direction of social capacity and service, his larger and more vital union with life, becomes the unifying aim; and discipline, culture and information fall into place as phases of this growth*” (MW, 1, 55).

Within this framework, the role of the study of philosophy (which cannot be seen as separated from the other studies in its epistemological structure and in its function within educational curricula) has to be consistent with the general educational aim of the growth of individuals and communities, consisting in a continuous development and orientation of their “*social capacity and service*”.

This is further clarified in *The Child and the Curriculum* where Dewey points out that there are two “*fundamental factors in the educative process*” the presence of “*an immature, undeveloped being*” which needs to be sustained in his/her growth and “*certain social aims, meanings, values incarnate in the matured experience of the adult*”. On this basis “*the educative process is the due interaction of these forces. Such a conception of each in relation to the other as facilitates completest and freest interaction is the essence of educational theory*” (MW.,2.273).

Within this framework “*to the growth of the child all studies are subservient; they are instruments valued as they serve the needs of growth*” . From this perspective the real value of the study of philosophy lies in its capacity to “serve” the process of individual and collective growth.

Does Philosophy have this capacity?

This depends on the epistemic position it assumes both with regard to individual and collective experience.

According to Dewey, no form of knowledge can be inserted into human life “*from without*” since “*learning involves reaching out of the mind. It involves organic assimilation starting from within*”. (MW, 2, 277): the active participation of the learner in the process of knowledge construction is necessary because “*subject-matter is but spiritual food, possible nutritive material. It cannot digest itself; it cannot of its own accord turn into bone and muscle itself; it cannot of its own accord turn into bone and muscle and blood*” (MW.2.277).

This means that the study of philosophy needs to be activated “*from within*” the fields of human experience taking into account the fact that individual and collective experience “*already contains within itself elements--facts and truths--of just the same sort as those entering into the formulated study; and, what is of more importance, of how it contains within itself the attitudes, the motives, and the interests which have operated in developing and organizing the subject-matter to the plane which it now occupies*” (MW, 2, 278).

This requires a strong involvement on the part of the learner starting from different fields of human experience and finding within them the ideas, issues and problems that have generated the construction of a specific form of knowledge, considered as the by product of a process of inquiry. deeply imbedded in those fields.

Within this framework, the study of philosophy must be conducted on the basis of the acknowledgment of the emergence of philosophical motives and interests in individual and collective life, which recover and reflect ideas, problems and themes of the past and lead us towards the future.

From a pedagogical perspective, this means that the educational role of philosophy should be seen not only within school curricula but also within individual and collective life in a lifelong and lifewide horizon.

Dewey clearly points this out in the essay *Philosophy and American National Life* as he states that

“a Philosophy has to be conceived and stated in terms of conditions and factors that are moving generally in non-philosophic life” because the *“systems of Philosophy however abstract in conception and technical in exposition, lie, after all, much nearer the heart of social, and of national, life than superficially appears”* (MW,3.73)..

It is important to point out that within this framework Philosophy is conceived as *“a language in which the deepest social problems and aspirations of a given time and a given people are expressed in intellectual and impersonal symbols”* (MW,.3.74).

Philosophy has therefore a *cultural and social role* insofar as *“philosophical problems are in last analysis but definitions, objective statements, of problems which have arisen in a socially important way in the life of a people”*; we have therefore to consider it as *“a reflective self-consciousness of what first exists spontaneously, effectively, in the feelings, deeds, ideas of a people”* (MW,.3.74).

For this reason it *“shall be instrumental rather than final, and instrumental not to establishing and warranting any particular set of truths, but instrumental in furnishing points of view and working ideas which may clarify and illuminate the actual and concrete course of life”* (MW, 3, 78).

From this perspective, philosophy is not only considered as a subject which it is possible to approach within educational curricula but also as a reflective device which helps in the clarifying of the problems emerging from all the experiences characterizing human life.

This is because, as far as it can have an *“insight into specific conditions of value and into specific consequences of ideas”*, philosophy can be conceived as a *“method of moral and political diagnosis and prognosis”* as Dewey points out in the essay *the Influence of Darwin on Philosophy* anticipating some later reflections on the social role of philosophical inquiry (MW, 4, 13).

Within this framework, Dewey comes to consider in detail and clarify the cultural and social necessity of studying philosophy (*The study of Philosophy*, MW, 6) pointing out that such studies

“acquaint the student with the forces that create ideas and make them potent” and therefore give *“some increase of expertness in the use of the tools by which the leading ideas of humanity are worked out and tested”*. From this perspective, philosophy comes to have an educational role considering that *“to help a man make a living is the ultimate end of education”* and that *“to have some part in the making of ideas is a necessary part in the making of a living that is worth living”* (MW,6.138).

But the relationship between philosophy and education is not only grounded in a coincidence of the cultural and social functions and roles given to philosophy and education.

It is determined by the acknowledgement of the normative and reflective role of philosophy within all the arenas of social agency and practice, which include education as well.

This role positions it on a *meta-level* regarding educational processes which may involve philosophical contents and practices but are first of all framed and sustained by a philosophical frame of reference.

In *Contribute to a Cyclopedia of Education* (MW, 7) Dewey describes philosophy as a *“general theory of education”* that is to say *“the theory of which education is the corresponding art or practice”*. (MW, 7.303).

Education is here conceived as a broad field of experiences which includes *“all the agencies and influences that shape individual and collective disposition”* (MW,7.304) and involves *“ordinary daily intercourse”* which is in turn *“dependent upon the political organization of society, the relations of classes to one another, the distribution of wealth, the spirit in which family life is conducted, and so on”*. From this perspective *“every condition, arrangement, and institution that forms the emotional and imaginative bent of mind that gives meaning to overt action is educational”* (MW, 7.304).

Education is not an *“incidental and unregulated by-product”*; it is, instead, a reflective and regulated endeavor oriented and sustained by aims and ends. For this reason, it must be grounded in a *“general theory”* intended as *“the idea of which a consciously guided education is the practical counterpart”* (MW, 7.304).

This *“general theory of education”* is philosophy, here conceived in a very *“vital and human sense”* and understood as a form of reflection which *“takes us out of the immediate pressure and hurly-burly of overt action”*. Through reflection we experiment, we try *“a temporary turning aside from the immediate scene of action in order to note the course of events, to forecast probable and possible issues, to take stock of difficulties and resources, to bring to explicit consciousness evils that may be remedied, to plan a future course of action”* and this process makes us more and

more aware of and responsible for our actions and practices in terms of the aims and values that orient them.

With reference to educational aims and values Dewey points out that philosophy “cannot create values by thinking about them, by defining and classifying and arranging them” but it can think about these values and promote “discrimination as to what is genuinely desirable, and thereby contribute to subsequent conduct a clearer and more deliberately settled method of procedure in attaining what is desired” (MW 7, 305).

As a “general theory” philosophy grounds all the kinds of educational experiences and practices imbedded into human living and can be used as a reflective tool which helps to clarify and give meaning to those experiences and practices with reference to a regulative framework.

On these basis the normative and reflective function of philosophical inquiry in education “is to be other than an idle and unverifiable speculation” but a theory of a “balanced and articulated experience” which cannot be conceived as the “external application to educational affairs of a conception of reality ready made independently of education” (MW; 7.307).

It is, instead, a reflective process emerging from within the educational experience and aimed at determining and orienting it as well as at evaluating it “as a whole” (MW.7.308). So doing, Philosophy can “throw light upon the spirit and aims of education” thus responding to an especially urgent social request.

In these terms, Dewey gives to philosophy a meta-educational role which has very strong social implications as he describes in *Democracy and Education*.

Here he underlines the “intimate connection between philosophy and education” which is grounded in the fact that education offers to philosophy “a vantage ground from which to penetrate to the human, as the appears. distinct from the technical, significance of philosophic discussions”. This is because “the educational point of view enables one to envisage the philosophic problems where they arise and thrive, where they are at home, and where acceptance or rejection makes a difference in practice”. (MW,9, 338).

For Dewey the function of philosophy -conceived as a “general theory of education” - is strictly connected to education intended as a “social function” and this will give to philosophy a very strong political and social role as a guide to human conduct.

This is role indeed mediated by the social role provided to education considered as a “constructive agency of improving society” which represents “not only a development of children and youth but also of the future society of which they will be the constituents”.

Education becomes a social development device insofar as it contributes to the construction of intellectual tools and forms of knowledge and practice which –transferred within social systems-

can help societies to deal with significant social issues. philosophy must be therefore a leading guide towards this aim according not only to a criterion of truth but also to a “*criterion of social worth*” (MW,9.199), the social worth of educational contents and outcomes.

This obtains on the basis of the acknowledgment of the existing “*difference in the social scope of purposes and the social importance of problems*” involved in educational contexts which needs to be explored through a meta-educational device, providing reflective guidelines to the educational practices situated within those contexts.

According to Dewey, this is, indeed, the role of philosophy, because “*unless a Philosophy is to remain symbolic--or verbal--or a sentimental indulgence for a few, or else mere arbitrary dogma, its auditing of past experience and its program of values must take effect in conduct*”, intended in a wide social perspective.

In *The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy* (MW, 10) Dewey acknowledge philosophy as a tool to explore the concrete conditions of human agency and to sustain it within the different fields of individual and collective experience and states that “*it is not necessary, it is not even desirable, to set forth Philosophy as a scheduled program*”, due to the nature of Philosophy itself which is “*vision, imagination, reflection*”, functions that separated from action “*modify nothing and hence resolve nothing*” while “*action which is not informed with vision, imagination, and reflection, is more likely to increase confusion and conflict than to straighten things out*” (MW, 10).

In *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (MW, 12) philosophy is explored in its political, practical and social function, recovering the role of an intelligent orientation for human action as well as a regulative and normative role, while still keeping a reflective and theoretical function of understanding for events and social forces; nonetheless the function of philosophical inquiry goes beyond simple understanding insofar as it “*can form ideals, that is aims, which shall not be either illusions or mere emotional compensations*” but a concrete guide for individual and collective actions and practices according to a reflective pattern (MW, 12, 155).

Later in *The Public and his Problems* (LW 2) Dewey will indicate philosophers as “*persons of a specialized infrequent habit* (LW,2, 336) who may perform a reflective agency aimed at contrasting the presence of “*a social pathology which works powerfully against effective inquiry into social institutions and conditions*”. This pathology “*manifests itself in a thousand ways; in querulousness, in impotent drifting, in uneasy snatching at distractions, in idealization of the long established, in a facile optimism assumed as a cloak, in riotous glorification of things ‘as they are’ in intimidation of all dissenters--ways which depress and dissipate thought all the more effectually because they operate with subtle and unconscious pervasiveness*” (LW; 2, 342).

In *Philosophy and Civilization* (LW 3) Dewey argues for a philosophy identifiable as a form of knowledge having a concrete and historical existence and therefore a “*temporal passage and a diversity of local habitations*” sustaining that it cannot be conceived “*as a revelation of eternal truths*” but must be understood as “*a revelation of the predicaments, protests, and aspirations of humanity*” (LW, 3, 4).

But philosophy is not “*just a passive reflex of civilization that persists through changes, and that changes while persisting. It is itself a change*”. For this reason it may appear that it has “*a more humble function than that which is often assigned it*” (LW, 3, 4).

Indeed, it has a crucial role for social growth and development as far as it performs a normative and regulative function for all the forms of agency and practice which sustain a society. Its prime function is that of rationalizing the possibilities of experience- especially collective human experience- introducing and maintaining in all the fields of associate living a sound process of reflection which orients individual and collective actions towards a common good.

Philosophy performs, therefore, essentially a moral role as it is focused on problems referring to action and practice within different social contexts and performs as a tool of social understanding. This is particularly true for educational contexts which “*proposes to philosophy questions which challenge all its resources and which test all its theories*” and therefore “*furnish it with its most direct and most urgent opportunity*” as Dewey notes in *The Sources of a Science of Education* (LW, 5, 29).

Philosophy indeed “*neither originates nor settles ends*” for education but occupies “*an intermediate and instrumental or regulative place*” within educational practice, having a “*definite and constant regard to the concrete experiences focusing on the ends and values which are produced in educational processes*” (LW, 5, 29).

According to this perspective, philosophical inquiry performs a fundamental function of orientation and regulation of individual and collective actions and practices and is therefore considered as an essential tool to deal reflectively with the main issues and problems which characterize human life and conduct.

This is the primary condition for a “recovery of philosophy” which Dewey had pointed out may happen only when philosophy would cease “*to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men*” (MW 10: 46).

In the essay *Has Philosophy a future* Dewey points out that “*search that is specifically philosophical should be directed to what is most comprehensive within human affairs and occupations, not towards that which is completely independent of concerns and occupations that*

are distinctively human” indicating the necessity to focus on relevant, urgent but also broad and comprehensive issues and topics, which have to be connected to “*distinctively human*” concerns and occupations (LW, 16, 366).

Dewey here seems to suggest that the epistemic starting point for philosophical inquiry is grounded in the individual and collective experience of human existence, or in the experience that we have of existence as humans.

This starting point grounds also the normative context of philosophical inquiry which requires to be situated within the multiple fields of individual and collective life and experience and not outside them.

From this perspective, philosophical inquiry requires also to be regulated by the practical norms which orient individuals and communities in their actions and practices within these experiential fields while it functions as a useful tool to construct, develop and modify these norms.

In the above mentioned essay as well as in *Philosophy's Future in Our Scientific Age* (LW, 16) Dewey looks for a philosophy intended as a form of “*wisdom that shall be a guide of life marking a return to the original view of Philosophy as a moral undertaking in the sense in which the moral and the deeply and widely human are identical*” (LW, 16, 366) .

He points out the continuity of the empirical and theoretical dimensions of human experience and advocates for a philosophy that has to be fully relevant to an age in which “*issues flow from natural science, and not from a supra-natural world or from a philosophy purporting to deal with what is super-mundane and super-human*” (LW,16.382).

In these terms Philosophy comes to perform a “*specifically human office*” detaching itself from mere intellectual activity and directing its interests toward social reform. What is at stake is “*a definite change in the direction of philosophical inquiry*” in order for it to be fully relevant to a new age in which the main issue is to convert what is explored philosophically “*into conduct that refers to the well-being of man*” and philosophers cannot “*hope for a more arduous task or for a more inspiring cause to which to devote their intellectual efforts*” (LW, 16.382).

This task requires a strong educational commitment both on a theoretical as well as on a practical level as well as a conjunct work with education so to help individuals and communities in becoming more and more reflective on human agency.

References

The Collected Works of John Dewey, Jo Ann Boydston, ed., 37 volumes (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1991).