

PHILOSOPHY OF LIFELONG EDUCATION

Kenneth Wain. 1987. London: Croom Helm.

Philosophy of Lifelong Education (PLE) offers a philosophical examination of lifelong education (L.E.) both as a concept and as an educational program. In popular discourse, the word 'philosophy' is frequently misused—it is often equated with one's view of perspective whether or not one's view has any philosophical import or foundation. Although Wain is dealing with "an applied field", *PLE* is not simply an account of what the author believes about L.E.

PLE clarifies the meaning of 'lifelong education', examines critically the different existing trends within L.E. theory (some of the authors referred to include E. Faure, R.H. Dave, P. Lengrand and Ettore Gelpi), argues that L.E. lacks a coherent program (i.e., "a right philosophical expression for the theory" (ii)), searches for an internally coherent program and one that is "empirically relevant because it responds adequately to the pressure and demands of historical context" (30). This quest provides a rather thorough survey of humanism (Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Rousseau, Marx, Huxley and Paul Kurtz), existentialism (Kierkegaard and Van Cleve Morris), liberal philosophy of education (M. Oakshott, R.S. Peters, A. O'Hear and J.P. White) and pragmatism (Dewey).

Although this survey is both explanatory and critical, it is mostly a critique of the first three philosophical positions under investigation. None of these three positions, Wain argues, provide the adequate philosophical expression for the educational theory of L.E.: (a) the theories held by "humanists" about humanism indicate "little agreement about how it can present itself as a coherent programme..." (98); (b) while admitting the "positive insights" (128) of existentialism, Wain thinks that existentialism is "incompatible with the very having of an educational programme, lifelong or of any other description" (127) and it leads to a kind of "subjectivism unacceptable to the outlook of the lifelong education movement" (129); (c) liberal philosophy of education is criticized on holding conservative and formal views about education; even J.P. White's revised position¹ is not seen as being compatible with the L.E. program. The only way to save this position, according to Wain, is by introducing "radical modifications" (160) which "entail the very abandonment of the current liberal education programme" (160).

Pragmatism, as expressed in the work of Dewey, is ultimately deemed by Wain as the best choice given that it is "actually consistent with the movement's lifelong education programme, because it alone is compatible with the conceptualizing of a 'learning society' within it. A humanism which emphasizes a tradition of 'tragic guilt', as Suchodoloski's does, or radical individual responsibility, as Lengrand's does, or a universal human 'community', as Kirpal's and others do, cannot be the focus of such a society" (197).

The concluding chapter of *PLE* clarifies the concept 'learning society'. Wain argues that a 'learning society' as a community is both morally acceptable and provides the formal embodiment of the L.E. program. Wain's rationale for this is that it "satisfies the tension between the ideal of 'self-realization' and the demands of socialization" (207) without being restricted to either radical individualism or radical collectivism.

Wain's project, then, falls within both the "public" and "professional" dimensions of philosophy of education as characterized by Jonas F. Soltis.² For Wain's endeavor is both programmatic—it aims at influencing educational practices by providing value-laden prescriptions expressed in coherent and comprehensive statements—and applies the philosophical rigor (of clarifying concepts, identifying contradictions, detecting inconsistencies, flushing out assumptions of ideological positions, and providing arguments and justification) or conceptual and normative educational concerns. In this sense, Wain's general approach provides a very laudable example of how one could make progress in applied philosophy.

Notwithstanding my positive comments, I do have some serious reservations with parts of the elaborate but clear thesis defended in this book. I will identify two main parts (I and II) of this thesis and then raise some questions.

Part I

Wain rejects the analytic philosophy of education approach which dominated the field of philosophy of education in the 60s, 70s and early 80s. According to Wain, it claims to be "value-neutral" and neglects the historical-contextual considerations. This approach, Wain contends, leads to "a liberal philosophy of education" which tends to restrict education to schooling. Thus, such an approach confuses L.E. with either lifelong upbringing or an "extension of school and university learning into adult life" (139), and "renders... 'self-education' a self-contradictory one... " (140). Moreover, a liberal

philosophy of education, according to Wain, rests on what Rorty calls the foundationalist project in philosophy. This "casts philosophy into the role of guardian of culture..." (9) and puts it in "a privileged position to adjudicate between the different knowledge claims that constitute culture..." (9).

Part II

Wain claims to be working within the paradigm offered by Pragmatism and Philosophical Hermenutics. He also attempts to defend "the 'relativistic' consequences of hermenutic philosophy... [which] rejects the possibility of an objective commensuration between different programmes, between different knowledge-claims, [and] which rejects the traditional fact-value distinction" (12). This is a central point in Wain's thesis. For, according to Wain, one of the main reasons Dewey's pragmatism is compatible with the pragmatic L.E. program (in contrast to the utopic trend, as exemplified in Faure's work) is precisely Dewey's notion of growth and his refutation of static ideals. A defense of relativism, then, becomes crucial to Wain's philosophy of L.E. proposed in this book.

Criticism of I

There are different stages in the development of analytic philosophy of education. Representatives of the more recent mode of this approach—moderate analytic philosophers of education—do not defend neutrality. They also take contextual considerations into account. I have argued at length that the recent criticism of analytic philosophy of education is outdated since it focuses on a trend in analytic philosophy of education which no longer exists.³ Analytic philosophers of education have reflected on the early analytical work, realized certain mistakes and broadened their approach to analysis. Moreover, the recent analytic approach does not necessarily adhere to all of the tenets of the liberal philosophy of education program as identified by Wain. Although some proponents of the analytic approach have tended to defend a narrow concept of the education person, this approach is not necessarily incompatible with the openness required by the L.E. program, nor does it necessarily lead to a defense of the *status quo*. Wain writes: "it is evident that education for a fixed and static order accommodates the *status quo* better than one that encourages an experimental outlook, that concentrates on the dynamic aspects of life..." (181-2).

And the liberal philosophy of education approach is characterized as one that strives for objectivity. While I do not want to discourage "an

experimental outlook" in education, one needs to point out that Wain's claim is *not* necessarily the case. One should recall the example of Plato who proposed an ideal educational program which aimed at fixed and static forms but which, given the *context*, actually would have disrupted the *status quo* if it were to have been implemented. A similar point can be made with regard to R. S. Peters' vision of an educated person: if Peters were to be taken seriously some things in schools would have to be altered *radically*. (This remark should not be taken as a defense of Peters' notion of an educated person.)

Criticism of II

One of Wain's reasons for defending "the hermeneutical form of inquiry" is that it allows an "openness to the world" and encourages "the ideal attitude of tolerance of the other . . . [which] opens the way for the 'fusing' of other horizons with one's own" (20). Moreover, it seriously takes into account the historical context. One needs to question, however, whether (i) these qualities are unique to the kind of inquiry defended by Wain and (ii) these qualities necessarily lead to the kind of relativism embedded in philosophical hermeneutics. William Hare, for example, a moderate analytical philosopher of education who has argued for the ideal of open-mindedness, warns us that this ideal does not lead to relativism or subjectivism.⁴ In fact, Hare argues quite convincingly that the attitude of open-mindedness is *not* incompatible with the notion of objectivity. Harvey Siegel has made a similar point with regard to the notion of critical thinking.⁵ Moreover, it is important to indicate that moral tolerance ought not to be confused with relativism; neither is it the case that contextualism necessarily amounts to a defense of relativism. As J. F. Soltis and K. A. Strike conclude: "We can be objective without being certain, and we can be tolerant and open to other points of view without being relativists."—a view which Wain, unfortunately, does not consider.⁶

Wain's defense of relativism includes an attempt to reject the common critique of the paradox or contradiction of relativism. It seems to me that he fails to do this. According to Wain, the defining premise of *all* forms of relativism is the following: "All our judgments about the world are made from a cultural view point" (15, my emphasis). Is this statement—a publicly pronounced one—made from *a* cultural standpoint? Wain's reply, to be consistent, has to be in the affirmative. But then how can one claim that this statement applies to *all* cases?

Wain is correct in holding that the relativist's defining premise does not preclude the possibility of their being several beliefs, values, and dispositions that "*happen* to be held cross-culturally" (17, my emphasis). But this does not save relativism from the critique of the

paradox or contradiction of relativism. I should add that I am not denying the fact that people hold different views because of their cultural context. What I am claiming, as Mary Warnock puts it, is: "If we really believed that any moral [and non-moral] view was as good and worthy to be adopted as any other, then we would of course make no moral [and non-moral] judgements at all" (7). But in fact we do!

In conclusion, *PLE* is a well-organized book, and in general the argument flows very well. The book ought to be very useful as an initial reading for a graduate seminar in the foundations of lifelong education. In this respect, it is unfortunate that the book lacks a chapter on the various shades of Marxism and L.E. (At the end of the chapter on L.E. and Liberal Philosophy of education, Wain rather hastily concludes that the Marxist position does not deserve a separate chapter "because there are no fundamental differences between Marxists and liberals over the technical definition of education" (158).) Some might even complain about the omission of D. Vandenberg and Maxine Greene in the discussion on Existentialism, as well as the omission of Van Cleve Morris' criticism of Experimentalism in the chapter on Dewey. Notwithstanding these omissions, the book ought to generate very productive discussions and further inquiry into the foundations of a lifelong education program.

Reference Notes

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