An Overview of Various Philosophies of Education and Learning

-The Man Who Asked Questions-

The man known to be the founder of Western philosophy did not meet a peaceful death. Yet, it was a meaningful death and certainly one of his own accord. Socrates was a man who asked questions, and a man who died because of it.

Socrates was born in 469 B.C. to Sophroniscus, a stonemason, and Phaenarete, a midwife. Hardly considered wealthy, but not poor either, he performed the typical duties required of male Athenians by 18, and on many accounts was a valiant solider for the Athenian army in various conflicts [1]. Judging from these facts, one would be led to believe that Socrates was a great and respectable citizen in the city of Athens. However, Socrates also had a more "dangerous" side, strongly disapproved by most of his fellow Athenians. Socrates grew up during the "golden age of Greece", where Pericles, perhaps the world's first liberal politician, started to shift more democratic power to the masses, and under him, Athenian political power and liberty were no longer just strictly limited to property-owning aristocrats. Yet, Socrates was unwelcoming to these new democratic ideals, instead treating them with suspicion and believing that democracy, or more specifically the right to speak in assemblies and vote, meant entrusting the uneducated masses with too much power on issues too important, bound to create poorly decided and undesired outcomes [2]. These ideas in opposition to democracy were later manifested through his students, in particular Alcibiades and Critias, who both led temporary overthrows of Athenian democracy in 411 B.C. and 404 B.C., respectively [3].

What further added to Socrates' infamy, however, was the fact that he just simply loved to ask questions. When Socrates was done with his military service, he started roaming around the marketplace and talking to people, asking them about things seemingly straightforward yet extremely nuanced and hard to examine. For example, in a famous conversation with Euthydemus, Socrates asked if being deceitful always meant being immoral and was met with a firm "yes". He then asked whether or not a deceitful act such as stealing a knife from a friend about to harm themselves would be immoral. The answer wouldn't be so clear, in such a case [4].

By using deeper and deeper questions that continually challenged basic assumptions, Socrates exposed that people often did not know as much as they thought they knew, like how an experienced military commander may not truly know what "courage" is. Socrates believed that it was important for teachers and learners to engage in effective discourse centered around asking and answering questions, as this was the best way to actually guide a student to discover the subject matter, compared to simply telling students what they may need to know. This is what is now known as the "Socratic Method", a method of learning that emphasizes questioning, conversation, and discovery. It is often used to "explore the underlying beliefs that shape the students' views and opinions" and foster critical thinking, something that Socrates greatly valued [5].

Socrates' educational philosophy does not just stop here. Socrates defined learning as the seeking of truth, which is only possible if one is willing to first admit their own ignorance and then interpret and question the thoughts of wiser people. In other words, education not only consists of "knowing what you can", but more importantly, "what you do not know" [6]. Socrates also believed that there existed no individual or institution wise enough to have complete authority to "teach", instead promoting open dialogue through the engagement and empowerment of learners.

Socrates' antidemocratic ideas and love of awkward questions were enough for the Athenians. In 399 B.C. Socrates was brought to trial in Athens on charges of "impiety" and "corrupting the youth". Instead of directly defending himself against such charges, Socrates continued to question his accusers about inconsistencies in their beliefs and accusations, no doubt agonizing the crown and the jury, which found him guilty by a close 280-220 vote. In response, instead of fleeing the city, something his friends and followers strongly encouraged, Socrates calmly drank a hemlock poison and faced his death sentence [7].

Many parallels between the trial and execution of Socrates and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ have been drawn, a testament to the impact that Socrates has had on the world as the founder of Western philosophy. His ideas about education, or more specifically, what things are important to learn and how best to learn them, have greatly influenced philosophies on education and learning developed after him. It would be a great understatement and injustice to Socrates to even say that just a few of them were not built on his ideas.

The Enlightened One

One of the most influential thinkers of the Enlightenment was John Locke. While Locke's ideas about the state of nature, natural rights, and religious tolerance are widely remembered, primarily because they are the foundations of contemporary democratic and liberal thought, his contributions to the educational philosophy of empiricism are often overlooked, yet are just as important.

In his 1689 *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke asserted that human beings were born with a *tabula rasa*, or a blank slate, in contrast to the widely held belief that humans were born with preexisting ideas, knowledge, and beliefs, an idea belonging to the school of thought known as innatism [8]. Locke believed that ideas are whatever one experiences and reflects on, and experiences can only be obtained through the five senses. In other words, all knowledge comes from experience and not just rational yet abstract thinking. Similarly, knowledge must also be confirmed by experiences to be valid, which is the basis of modern empirical approaches to science, or more specifically, the scientific method, which emphasizes experimentation more than pure and abstract logical reasoning [9].

Then, around 1693, John Locke published perhaps the most influential work on education, ever, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, which initially was a series of letters to Locke's friends who asked him for advice on raising their son. In this revolutionary piece of work, Locke emphasized the importance of education to the development of a human being, with the famous quote "I think I may say that of all the men we meet with, nine parts of ten are what they are, good or evil, useful or not, by their education" [10]. He centered his book on the opinion that the main function of education is to instill virtuous behavior in children, which he defined as "that a man is able to *deny himself* his own desires, cross his own inclinations, and purely follow what reason

directs as best, though the appetite lean the other way" [11]. Furthermore, he argued, to instill a good education into children, who were in the most impressionable period of their lives, parents and teachers not only had to lead children to experiences and subsequent knowledge gained from said experience, but they also had to take great care of their physical needs and habits, an idea still widely accepted in the modern world [12].

Locke also valued critical-thinking skills and emphasized them in his *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* and argued it was important for children to learn how to seek out knowledge by themselves and enjoy the process [13]. He also valued academic and educational curricula based on utility, being against learning "useless subjects" like Greek and Latin, and instead emphasized science and vocational training [14][15].

While the ideas John Locke proposed may seem pretty straightforward and somewhat obvious to readers nowadays, his thoughts were in no way mainstream or uncontested at his time. His ideas on education, especially the concept of sensible experience and empiricism challenged and revolutionized what people thought of education at the time.

The Modern Approaches

The next major advancement in educational theory occurred around the 20th century, and it started with John Dewey, "arguably the most prominent American intellectual for the first half of the twentieth century". Dewey did away with Locke's theory of the *tabula rasa*, but rather argued that the goal of education was to take hold of children's activities, or in other words, teach them valuable skills, and give them a correct direction to work towards by themselves. He also emphasized the importance of individualizing the learning experience and believed that teachers not only had to know the material taught but also understand students' backgrounds to provide a more effective education [16]. Dewey thought that it was best to "learn by doing", and rejected any notions that treated education as a passive process where children were simply receptors of knowledge, instead promoting education where children were encouraged to experience, share, process, generalize, and apply actively [17].

One of the most influential ideas and theories that Dewey constructed was that of instrumentalism, which stresses the inherent utilitarian aspect of science, skills, and knowledge. According to instrumentalist views, no scientific facts, concepts, or theories can ever be regarded as being absolutely correct, because no amount of empirical research can ever rule out every single alternative explanation of phenomena. Knowing this, scientific ideas and skills should not be valued based on a falsely perceived correctness, but rather on the extent to which it is applicable in solving real-world skills [18]. For example, the physics formula F=ma is not valuable because of the intuition and experiments that proved it, but rather because of the rockets it has helped launch into space. Dewey's theory of instrumentalism's emphasis on utility directly ties in with his education theory, which sees education as a tool to achieve certain purposes and does not approve of "knowledge for the sake of knowledge".

Dewey's student, Mortimer J. Alder, would go on to paint another distinct chapter on educational philosophy in the 20th century. Instead of agreeing with Dewey's emphasis on skill-based knowledge, Alder promoted learning by studying the great writings of the Western world [19]. He believed that an organized, coherent, and cross-disciplinary list of books to be read and ideas to be understood was the best way to educate, and he himself edited multiple book sets such as Britannica's Great Books of the Western World (60 vols.), The Great Ideas Program (10 vols.), and

Gateway to the Great Books (10 vols.) [20]. By doing so, he also asserted his own authority of picking what to teach children, subsequently rejecting the idea that children get to choose what they learn themselves.

Another influential intellectual on education is E.D. Hirsch, who went back to previous philosophies of education that emphasized knowledge. It seems quite interesting that the most chronologically modern approach to education would be resemblant to a seemingly more "primitive" idea of education that required mindless memorization of dates and events. However, E.D. Hirsch makes some great points regarding why knowledge is important and useful. Hirsch believed in the idea of "communal knowledge", knowledge that is shared among a majority of informed members in a certain society [21]. Therefore, the reason that knowledge is useful, is not necessarily because the facts themselves are useful, but rather because everybody around you knows those facts, making them necessary for everyday discourse and communication.

Most modern educational approaches are a mix of the three ideas. For example, this essay itself demonstrates Alder's and Hirsch's views of education by introducing previous ideas about education and facts about educational philosophy but also demonstrates Dewey's emphasis on the applicational aspect of knowledge and education by teaching readers how to view and approach their own education. The impact these three intellectuals had is partly derived from the fact they complement each other so well and have together moved our understanding of education to an even further level.

-Coda-

Socrates told us that we may not actually know what we think we know, and he wished to expose the flaws of our basic assumptions by simply asking questions. John Locke said we had to experience to understand. Dewey believed we needed skills, Alder thought we must study ideas, and Hirsch valued communal knowledge.

While the ideas of these five thinkers have all influenced modern ideas regarding education, they are not without controversy, especially controversy among each other. Dewey's instrumentalism which says we cannot know anything for sure challenges Locke's empiricism which says knowledge is based on experiments, yet also resembles a bit of Socrates' idea that to learn, we must first know what we do not.

This brief overview of the development of educational philosophy accounts for the fact that an effective and healthy education requires a combination of all of these ideas, and must account for many factors among various learners, each needing a slightly different combination. Each individual should not go about their education without direction and theoretical guidance, but rather figure out what the best combination for themselves is.

Endnotes:

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