

IP and “Common Sense” Views of the Mind: Can We Communicate with Educational Psychologists?

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SUMMARY OF PAPER

Shelby Sheppard's study of the "logical relationships between the concepts of mind, knowledge, and education" gives us much to think about. Her stimulating critique shows her "deep concerns about implications of IP for education." Sheppard's paper has three parts. In the first, she describes changes that have occurred as a result of the cognitive revolution — from behaviorism to a study of mental processes, from a plurality of models of the mind to the dominant computational analogy, and from philosophers' indifference to psychology to an interest in research based on functionalism in the philosophy of mind. In the second part, Sheppard describes educational decisions influenced by the IP conception of mind. Here she argues that the IP model and the liberal education ideal are based on "conflicting conceptions of knowledge and education." In the third part, Sheppard raises theoretical issues related to the IP conception. One of these issues is that a narrow focus on cognitive psychology leads to a neglect of the public aspects of a liberal education. After building the case for the negative influences of the IP model on education, Sheppard describes an alternative based on "using common sense." She points toward a selection of educational experiences that "allow us to flourish as human beings."

CRITIQUE

Sheppard's argument has both practical and philosophical implications. One of her philosophical points is that human intentionality might provide a better framework for understanding the conception of mind implicit in the ideal of a liberal education, as compared with the IP metaphor. Though I believe that the intentional model of the mind does not provide any better mesh with the ideal of a liberal education than, say, the functional model, arguing this point would miss what I take to be the central point of Sheppard's paper. This is that the IP model has pernicious influences on education. Thus, any theoretical challenge to Sheppard must be sensitive to the rich case she draws linking philosophy of mind and education through the ideal of a liberal education.

Interpreting the nerve of Sheppard's argument to be practical, there is one philosophically uninteresting way to understand her paper, which I mention here for the sake of contrast. It is simply a fact that the IP model is the dominant metaphor used by well-respected educational theorists such as Bereiter. It is not likely that educational psychologists would be influenced by her critique, no matter how well the argument is made. The philosophically uninteresting point here is that there is a great difference between the ways in which philosophers of education and educational psychologists understand and appreciate education. This difference, I believe, boils down to a set of "turf issues" — Who should educate teachers? Who should get the most student credit hours? Like many members of PES, I have my biases here.

Underneath the bias, however, is another way to interpret Sheppard's practical point which I believe is philosophically interesting. It turns on a values issue. The values issue pertains to the social integrity of the liberal education ideal, which Sheppard points out in her reference to Oakeshott and the conversation of humankind. Beneath this value is the conviction that knowledge gained in a liberal education has an intrinsic worth that cannot be reduced to a narrow (or computational) instrumental function. This issue, and not the raw fact that educational psychologists and philosophers of education tend to think differently, raises the question of communicating with educational psychologists.

I do not think it is difficult to argue that there is a real conflict between a technologized educational psychology based on an instrumental or "tool" conception of knowledge and the ideal of a liberal education. But this conflict may be pragmatic, meaning here that it cannot be cashed out as something based on conflicting conceptions of mind. This points toward the uninteresting matter of fact that educational psychology is currently different from the philosophy of education, just mentioned. The conflict that Sheppard clearly describes between IP and liberal education may result from this fact. It may be an artifact of a dysfunctional relationship between those who interpret and use the "cognitive revolution" toward certain ends and the general public's fascination with technique. It is not clear to me that the IP metaphor contributes to this malady, although conversations with Sheppard may change my mind. Perhaps any technical, psychological model, in the hands of ardent followers of educational psychology, is likely to produce the same dangers for the liberal ideal as does the IP model.

An argument for this move — from the philosophy of mind and toward the sociology of interactions between educational psychologists and other "players" in the teacher education enterprise — would require at least two steps. The first would show how the IP model of the mind is a species of functionalism, which in turn is a species of the representational theory of mind (RTM). I think Sheppard would agree with me that this is not difficult to argue. From there, it would need to be shown how the RTM can live in harmony with the ideal of a liberal education. Rorty's well-known polemic against the RTM can actually be used to make this second point. Rorty shows that the RTM is a very old mistake, particularly evident in Kant but also found in Plato and the scholastic philosophers. It is unlikely that Kant, Plato, or Aquinas had serious difficulties with the ideal of a liberal education. In fact, it is likely that they embraced it, as do many contemporary philosophers of education. Nevertheless, if we buy only Rorty's historical argument that the RTM is an old mistake, then these historical figures were also under the grip of the RTM.

Sheppard, I believe, would argue that she has no serious problem with the RTM in the hands of philosophers. Or rather, if she does have serious problems, they are beyond the scope of her paper (and should be beyond the scope of my response). But this brings us back to the pragmatic issue mentioned above: Are there interesting things that philosophers of education can say to reputable educational psychologists such as Bereiter? And by interesting I mean something that an educational psychologist would also regard as interesting.

I hope the answer to this question is yes. I am not convinced that Sheppard would agree, which maybe points to our differing views about therapeutic philosophy. Our everyday common sense may tell us that we are not governed by some mysterious inexplicable forces that cause us to think and do this rather than that. But philosophers may help us construct psychological theories of the process, which is what I take cognitive scientists to be doing. This goes somewhat against the drift of Sheppard's paper. She writes (with Hacker) that "the task of philosophy is not to construct theories about cognitive processes which scientists can then elaborate and test; it is rather to destroy those illusions." Therapeutic philosophers such as Rorty, Wittgenstein, and maybe Dewey (on Rorty's reading at least) also counsel us to avoid the temptation to be constructive or systematic. But I wonder whether this message can be communicated to educational psychologists.

Educational psychologists may only want the facts (or the "data"). Philosophers have a healthy mistrust of the notion that the facts speak for themselves, a mistrust Nietzsche voiced so well when he said that there are no facts but only interpretations. Liberal education is an ideal. Educational psychologists, at least when they are working on scientific problems within their discipline, may have a low tolerance for the study of educational ideals as a scholarly enterprise. The "facts," when discussing ideals, are too value-laden for their tastes. I agree that the IP metaphor, in the hands those who interpret the work of educational psychologists in a narrow or technical way, can be used to work against the intrinsic value of a liberal education. This work can blunt the liberal ideal. However, it is not clear to me that this is due to a conceptual flaw in the IP metaphor. The "bad guy" need not be the IP metaphor here. Maybe an over-fascination with technology.