

Education's Ills and the Vanity of the Philosopher

Paul Farber

Western Michigan University

The difference between the most dissimilar characters, between a philosopher and a common street porter, for example, seems to arise not so much from nature, as from habit, custom, and education. When they came into the world, and for the first six or eight years of their existence, they were, perhaps, very much alike, and neither their parents nor playfellows could perceive any remarkable difference. About that age, or soon after, they came to be employed in very different occupations. The difference in talents comes then to be taken notice of, and widens by degrees, till at last the vanity of the philosopher is willing to acknowledge scarce any resemblance.¹

Adam Smith's keen observation is worth keeping in mind whenever metaphysically inclined thinkers pass firm judgments on the lot of humankind, especially judgments that reaffirm their relatively high standing. The late Dr. Bloom's diagnosis of the ills of American education comes to mind in this regard. Near the end of *The Closing of the American Mind*, he remarks:

The real community of man, in the midst of all the self-contradictory simulacra of community, is the community of those who seek the truth, of the potential knowers, that is, in principle, of all men to the extent they desire to know. But in fact this includes only a few, the true friends...This...is the only real friendship, the only real common good.²

Being able to distinguish the good and true is a remarkable feat of knowing, though confident claims to that effect are not uncommon. Their metaphysical underpinnings often radically diverge, however, no doubt another offshoot of Smith's "habit, custom, and education."

The insight is hardly new. The central issue was famously engaged in Dewey's critique of Hutchins. Dewey contended that "implicit in every assertion of fixed principles and eternal first truths [was] the necessity for some *human* authority to decide, in this world of conflicts, just what these truths are and how they shall be taught."³ The resulting struggles are especially problematic if "the claim to the possession of the truths by which life should be directed is asserted to have its origin outside of anything in actual experience," for when parties thus disagree "there is no reasonable...way of negotiating their differences."⁴ Ultimately, as Robert Westbrook notes, "[a]bsolutism [breeds] a head-bashing ethics."⁵

It is not surprising, therefore, that Patricia Rohrer would distance herself from Bloom's "conservative antidote" to what ails American education, even as she affirms important features of his diagnosis. Noting widespread "indifference" in a culture out of touch with the "intimate bond between education and the quest for truth,"⁶ a cause of education's ills is located in the diminished role of philosophically informed inquiry. By sidestepping the big questions associated with the passionate search for a good life, educators have brought it about that "expectation for reward for effort...has displaced the longing for knowledge." Absent "the prerequisite for a truly moral education," the multifarious concerns of mundane life smother genuine education in schools. The dichotomy implied for educators is between rising to the philosophical plane or reinforcing the preoccupations with personal success either

one sparks philosophical passion or manages mundane diversions. But what then of the educator's common struggle to maintain mundane decency despite the varieties of self-serving philosophical indulgence in and about practice? Rohrer seems, unlike Bloom, to worry about how the philosophically informed inquiry that is being prescribed to revitalize "the educational quest" should itself be questioned, especially if, in respect of democratic ideals, we would not wish simply to stoke the vanity of some community of true knowers. This is the problem if we are to build "an educational philosophy that aims to nurture the individual's passionate quest for how to live" without our efforts devolving into anti-democratic head-bashing in a culturally diverse society.

Rohrer's attempt to show the way in this regard relies on a certain ambiguity. An important step away from Bloom is the declaration that no philosophical truths are being assumed, no foundational metaphysics. We can, for example, awaken the young to the significance of Bloom's "big questions" without predetermining what they will be or how they should be approached. This core insight may be linked with Charles Taylor's recent suggestions concerning the role played by historically emergent "hypergoods" and diverse "horizons of significance" in a meaningful life.⁷ Education more attuned to such notions could "encourage each individual's recognition and exploration of the questions surrounding her beliefs, in all aspects of her education."

A kind of open-ended, liberal facilitation of student reflection on such matters has its appeal, though against the backdrop of diagnosed ills, the position can be challenged from politically diverse angles for the way it reaffirms an unhappy status quo. Bloomians would see the swamp of relativism merely deepened, while, for example, Freire worries that teachers who renounce their standing in authority in favor of a posture of facilitating are tacitly authoritarian, since they endorse the primacy of the system that maintains them in their privileged position.⁸

Rohrer sidesteps such criticism, however, for her comments suggesting a metaphysically neutral approach to inquiry are paired with a programmatically stronger position centered round the Kierkegaardian notions of subjective truth and indirect communication. We gather, for example, that "education must be guided by the notion that what is 'universally human' is not necessarily adherence to any particular truth, but the individual's passionate engagement with that which offers her life meaning — her 'absolute telos.'" While this requires that each student embrace the "passion of subjectivity," it is not, Rohrer claims, a neutral relativism, since "one does not choose one's subjective truth, but chooses only whether to embrace it and how to exist in light of it." What is at stake, on the strong view, is authentic being itself. As Rohrer puts it, the educational focus should be on the "interpenetration of what offers one's life meaning, and one's daily mode of existence. The difficulty of being genuinely human...is in holding these two things together." Teachers thus play an emancipatory role. By way of indirect communication, keeping open "the 'wound of negativity,'" they develop that "art whose secret is to set the recipient free to explore her own inwardness," awakening each learner's "need to explore...her own possibilities of how to live in the light of the demand placed upon her as a human being."

How are teachers to respond to the burdens implied in this, especially since their sense of calling typically is rooted in the multiple demands of the here and now of practice?⁹ And of those who do respond by encouraging students to contemplate their absolute telos and life's meaning, how many of their students would greet such invitations as a threat, a joke, a provocation to preach, or an occasion for despair? Should we think the less of those who reject the open invitation to embrace their genuine humanity, those unwilling to tread the path of a truly moral education? From the perspective of Rohrer's stronger position, how can we not pity those who fail to respond? Membership in the friends of Bloom is also, in principle, open to all. The central ambiguity of Rohrer's paper seems to me to reflect the understandable goal of avoiding this problematic comparison, by way of the weaker position, while buttressing philosophy's place at the center of educational practice by way of the stronger one.

What we make of the ambiguity depends, I think, on the way the problem is understood. If, as Rohrer suggests, following Bloom, philosophy is the tonic for education's ills, we would need to press for a clearer prescription, some further theoretical resolution. But perhaps the paper serves another, philosophically more modest role. Its ambiguity reflects the need for educators to keep our antimetaphysical weapons sharp, even while we strive to awaken students to the deepest questions bearing on their lives, including sometimes impossibly metaphysical ones. Viewed from a practical perspective, her paper suggests that it is sometimes right to invoke a Rortyan reduction — pragmatism's impatient response to claims about the unknowable essence of things, but not always. What the big questions are and how one should approach them in educational settings remain issues to ponder and contest. And while Patricia Rohrer's paper does not — and cannot on its own terms — offer a way to settle such matters in practice, its useful ambiguity reflects the nature of the problem educators face.

1. Adam Smith, quoted in David Paris, *Ideology and Educational Reform* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 104.

2. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 381.

3. John Dewey, "President Huthchins's Proposals to Remake Higher Education," quoted in Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 519.

4. John Dewey, "Lessons from the War — in Philosophy," in Robert. B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, 521.

5. *Ibid.*

6. All quotations not otherwise noted are from Patricia Rohrer, "Infinitely Interesting: Bloom, Kierkegaard, and the Educational Quest," in *Philosophy of Education 1996*, ed. Frank Margonis (Urbana, IL: The Philosophy of Education Society, 1997).

7. See, respectively, Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) and his *Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

8. Freire's remarks on this subject are found in Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo, "A Dialogue: Culture, Language, and Race," in *Breaking Free: The Transformative Power of Critical Pedagogy*, ed. Pepi Leisty, Arlie Woodrum, and Stephen Sherblom (Cambridge: Harvard Educational Review, 1996).

9. See e.g., David Hansen, *The Call to Teach* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1995).