
BOOK REVIEW

Some New Perspectives in Philosophy of Education, J.C. Walker, Occasional Paper No. 14, Department of Education, University of Sydney, 1983.

This collection of three essays is intended "to introduce some ideas in philosophy of education, and about philosophy of education, in a non-technical fashion", and to serve as an exemplar "...in improving the quality, and perhaps changing the content, or our (educational) theorizing" (p.1. - reviewer's enclosure). The first of these essays, 'Some Recent Developments in Philosophy of Education' discusses the rise and decline of analytic philosophy of education, the emergence within philosophy of education of an interest in work on epistemology and philosophy of science, and the more recent interest in, and influence of, marxism. In the second essay, 'Materialism and the Growth of Knowledge in Education', Walker addresses questions about the nature of knowledge and education from a philosophical position of materialism. The final essay, "'Examination Dilemmas": a practical application of logical analysis', shows how logical analysis has a practical contribution to make to educational debate. Although these essays differ markedly in their content - a robust resumé, of the field, an original approach to traditional questions and an exemplification of philosophy in action - taken collectively they present a unified point of view which could provide a refreshing and long awaited new introduction to philosophy of education.

In the first essay Walker provides an overview of philosophy of education since the early 1960s. If the historical treatment of the emergence and decline of analytic philosophy of education (APE) is brief the exposition of the central problem facing analysis - that of providing a criterion to separate a "correct" from an "incorrect" analysis - is clear and concise. His second objection to APE, centring on the epistemic autonomy of philosophy as a second order activity, may not be so clear to those unfamiliar with the ideas.

In the second section the reader is introduced to contemporary discussions of epistemology as part of philosophy of science in the post-Popperian literature, particularly that of Lakatos and his notion of theory competition. Section three discusses the introduction of philosophy as critique of ideology into philosophy of education. The conclusions of these two sections are rather negative - the insights of the philosophy of science literature have made little impact either on educational research or in unifying educational theory, and marxist philosophy of education, based upon Althusser, is incompatible with a theory of social change.

Seizing upon the shortcomings identified in the previous sections a programme for philosophy of education is then introduced. The theory competition methodology is said to permit consideration of possible theories within a framework where these notions would operate: (1), pragmatic criteria of choice; (2), a Quinean coherence theory of evidence; (3), the denial of the epistemic autonomy of philosophy and (4), a marxist account of society and of the production of knowledge.

'Materialism and the Growth of Knowledge in Education', the second essay in the collection, is an attempt to spell out what would be involved in (4). As the title suggests his theory of knowledge is based upon the philosophical theory of materialism - the monistic theory that all that exists is matter. First, an account of knowledge as programmed behaviour is introduced, in which knowledge "consists in the programmes, the dispositions to act, etched in material patterns in physical bodies." This knowledge, which depends upon social relations, can grow and change through changes in these social relations. Knowledge is not, therefore, certain. It is relative to existent social and historical conditions, but it is not relativist in the sense that any one theory is as

good as another, because the contingencies of a set of social or historical conditions must rule out some theories as even possible contenders for knowledge. What counts as knowledge becomes a matter of critical preference between theories - to be decided by dialogue and experimentation, which of course would presuppose considerable freedom of speech, freedom of action and access to the dissemination of ideas.

In 'Examination Dilemmas', the third and final essay, Walker tries to show that logical analysis can assist in holding rational and informed views on educational matters. This essay should also be seen as an exemplification of the dialogue necessary in theory preference and thus another aspect of the programme for philosophy of education outlined in the conclusion of the first essay.

Starting from a newspaper editorial in which certain political policy is advocated Walker shows how logical analysis can clarify the nature of the argument(s), the validity of the argument(s) and the broad theoretical contexts in which debates are embedded. At the same time the reader is introduced to fundamental notions such as validity of argument and the distinction between the validity of an argument and the truth of its conclusion. This is an excellent example of extended logical analysis. The arguments are identified, sharpened, tested for validity and the truth of their premises assessed. What appears to be a neutral practical problem concerning the fairness of examinations is shown to be a problem, whose "solutions" lie deeply embedded in non-neutral social theory. Whilst the author does not do so it is but a short step to ask questions of critical preference. In this way then the third essay is also part of the programme outlined earlier in the first essay.

It has already been said that this collection provides a refreshing change in the introduction-to-philosophy-of-education literature. On the other hand it is a partisan introduction but, as this is explicitly admitted, the reader can be under no illusion or mystification. In the very full notes and references the reader can pursue the author's ideas and those of his opponents [which is certainly not the case with other books reviewed in this issue - Ed's. note]. A concern of this reviewer is that the collection is not as free of technicalities as the introduction suggests, and at points is difficult. But then if it is meant to improve the quality of theorizing it is not meant to be read in private or in a vacuum; or did I miss something on the way?

Hamish Morrison