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REMARKS ON PHILOSOPHY AND THE CURRICULUM

by
John D. Wilson

If our schools and colleges are in difficulty today it may be in large measure because no one any longer understands why we teach what we do. This is an exaggeration, of course, but it is made in order to register the fact that it is not simply students who question the shape and character of the curriculum. Faculties too have suffered the appalling experience of discovering that they as well do not know what they are about, collectively, and thus are powerless to respond to the questions implicitly or explicitly directed to them. One result (thus far) has been an enormous infatuation with the idea of change. No serious statement about American education today can avoid the rhetoric of drastic curriculum reform.

But change need not be a bad thing, especially if it mandates self-examination at the most fundamental level. If the new pedantry is required to stare at itself in a mirror, we might well be delivered from the undernourishing distortions of liberal learning which are now so prevalent in our colleges and universities . . . and thus, at some remove, in our secondary schools. Our schools and colleges need nothing so much as they need faculties who know the difference between liberal learning and its many mockeries and who have the self-confidence to explain that difference to their students and to interested others.

Curriculum rationalization is, of course, an old problem which takes on new forms for each generation. The value of the liberal arts and sciences, properly conceived, should . . . no, *must* be rediscovered by each of us. No curriculum can hope to survive in any vital way if it relies only upon habit or tradition for its justification.

It is to this important problem that Professor Scheffler speaks when he considers how general philosophy might be made to contribute more than it now does to the education of teachers. He would deny this large claim, no doubt, for his paper is circumspectly limited to a consideration of how the traditional components of a teacher-training program might be usefully modified to include work in the philosophy of the discipline to be taught. And this represents a modest enough suggestion, one we can scarcely deny, for what could be more important to the teacher of history or science than that he leave the lecture room or the laboratory long enough to take up analytically the essential character of his discipline — that he may be made to think of history or science in epistemological terms, that he consider the form of knowledge it represents and come to some understanding of the way it is organized and what claims it can make upon truth. Professor Scheffler argues that the prospective teacher may never directly introduce speculation of this sort in his own classroom, but that he cannot possibly develop a classroom strategy, a syllabus informed by the intention to convey a specific set of mental habits, unless he has engaged in such speculation before he enters the classroom. If this be granted, the argument runs, then it is preferable that the speculation be systematic, that it be subject to philosophical criticism, that it be informed by the considerable

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philosophical literature so immediately accessible but so rarely used (or discovered) by the prospective teacher.

I am persuaded that the 'philosophy of' approach could be enormously helpful to the future teacher as he prepares to enter his first classroom; indeed, it could be considered an indispensable prerequisite to his consideration of teaching methods. But I would go further still to argue that systematic experience with the literature of 'philosophy of,' in spite of its eclectic character, will contribute more to the development of a self-confident teacher of the liberal arts and sciences than almost anything in his preparation. Indeed, it is precisely this pervasive lack in our school and college faculties which accounts for the flatulent waffling we hear when the 'relevance' question is raised. If the teacher of history cannot describe the shape of his discipline, cannot articulate how it organizes and verifies knowledge and what its range of pretension is and how this differs from, say, the scientific disciplines, then he cannot teach history in any inclusive sense. Moreover he cannot rationalize, either in faculty meetings or with his students in class or outside, why it is important that history be an integral part of the curriculum. Not only will he be unable to speak well of the uses of the past, but he will be powerless before the simplest questioning of the concept of 'historical truth.' And thus he will not truly fulfill his responsibility to his students or to the community.

There is in my affirmation of Professor Scheffler's argument, then, an assumption that may need further examination. It is that not only will a more thoughtful, self-confident teacher of history be assured by exposure to 'philosophy of history' but that this exposure will also insure a more thoughtful generalist on the faculty, that is, a person who will be better equipped to contribute to the overall development of the school or college curriculum. To be sure, Professor Scheffler hasn't argued this far. Nonetheless I think it likely, and I think so in spite of the fact that the provision of 'philosophy of' experiences in teacher training programs may well be possible only at the expense of experiences of a broader kind, i.e. work in fields other than the teaching discipline or work in traditional philosophy of education. What I am suggesting is that systematic and thoughtful examination of a school or college curriculum must be taken up by teachers who are accustomed to the rules governing inquiry of this sort, who know the terms appropriate to it and who are prepared to communicate with each other in those terms. I am certain, for example, that serious reading in the philosophy of history, even if that reading does not develop an explicit comparative frame, will equip the history teacher to discuss responsibly with his colleagues the value of social science field work or the wisdom of admitting area studies of one sort or another into the curriculum or whether or not algebra should be introduced in the 7th grade. And so with the other 'philosophies of.' I urge this extension of the argument only because it seems to me valid, and if so, must be reckoned amongst the most conspicuously absent of the qualities of mind our schools now so clearly need.

Having established my agreement with Professor Scheffler's argument (indeed, having extended it), I must also, to satisfy my charge, raise questions about its implementation. In brief, how can our colleges accommodate it? Who will teach philosophy of' and at the expense of what?

These are not, I hope, examples of the usual administrative stalling when con-

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fronted with an idea. I think they are important questions directed as much at the character of the graduate preparation of our collegiate faculties as at the registrar's time-schedule. For example, can we trust this instruction to our science departments or to the faculties in history, literature, and so on? Or must we ask the philosophy department to provide 'philosophy of' instruction in each of the major disciplines? It seems to me clear that it must be instruction provided under the general auspices of the philosophers, with as much participation as can be managed with the resident historians, scientists, literary scholars, et cetera. There are difficulties in this suggestion, not all of them political in nature. But I am led to make it by the contention that too few of us in collegiate departments of study have any sophistication at all in the philosophical literature explicating the epistemological assumptions of our fields. We *do* science, we teach it by having others do it alongside us, but too few of us think about it in any rigorous or systematic way.

There are other problems as well. We might be successful in persuading the scientist to make room for the study of the philosophy of science in teacher preparation programs (if he need only be minimally involved) but what about the literary scholars or critics? In literature the problem of eclecticism is especially hard to overcome. And even if one manages to accommodate the lack of a unified theory of literature with settled modes of thought, can we persuade the literary scholar that general principles, however derived or verified, are as important as the idiosyncratic work of literary art? He will argue that *Lear* is our first obligation, not as an exemplification of a form of thought or of a theory of tragedy or anything else beyond its own uniquely powerful testament. Thus, curriculum strategy will likely get into trouble with the literary scholar if it asks him to discuss how it is possible to speak of literature as a 'way of knowing' or to discuss a literary artifact as an exemplum of a systematic way of organizing a certain kind of knowledge. He will permit a senior course in criticism or a graduate seminar in the theory of literature, but he will argue strenuously that his main obligation to his undergraduate students, including his prospective teachers, is to enlarge their direct experience of great works of literary art and to extend their capacity to respond sensitively to them.

There may be similar problems in the other relevant disciplines. The historian has long been friendly to the philosophical analysis of his discipline but customarily has been reluctant to take it up *before* a student has become "serious," i.e. before his advanced graduate work designates him as one who wishes to become *an historian* rather than a teacher of history. In brief, the historian sees 'philosophy of' as vitally important to the *doing* or writing of history (unlike the scientist) rather than to the teaching of history in the classroom. Whether he can be made to see its general application and welcome it into his program for secondary teachers remains to be seen.

In anticipating these caveats, I may well be reflecting still another — the reluctance to concede that most students interested in secondary teaching will have the speculative capacity to move from the 'materials' of their subject — not in the direction of application to their anticipated classroom problems — but in the more austere and abstract direction of considering where in the intellectual landscape their subject is located and what its conceptual framework is like. It is true, I think,

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that not all of us are equipped for work of this kind, either as students or teachers, and the spectacle of huge university lecture halls filled with reluctant 'philosophers of' is not especially reassuring. But in what would their reluctance reside? In the assumption that teaching photosynthesis in a laboratory or the importance of the Elizabethan compromise will not require an understanding of philosophy of science or philosophy of history — i.e., that these last are not immediately relevant to their practical problems as prospective teachers.

I believe with Professor Scheffler that they are wrong in this assumption and I believe it would be relatively easy to dissuade them of it. But clearly it would be necessary to do so in the first instance. And, I might add, it would be enormously helpful to have on hand, when the attempt were made, a teacher-scholar with Professor Scheffler's gifts.