

Philosophy and the Value of Education: A Reply to John Wilson

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I am grateful for John Wilson's astute comments on my paper. Some of Wilson's comments rest on arguments found in his *Preface to the Philosophy of Education* (1979), in my view one of the very few genuinely serious works in contemporary educational philosophy. My intention in this reply is, first, to argue that I do not, as Wilson suggests, attempt to identify philosophy with the concept of education, and, second, to argue that Wilson has misrepresented my view of the content of Socratic (or "philosophical") education.

Philosophy and the Concept of Education

Wilson argues that I err in "identifying philosophy with education in general," and thereby attempting "to monopolize the concept [of education], in defiance of normal usage." In his view, "Muir thinks that philosophy, the 'fundamental questions,' to be so important that he is prepared to identify it with the concept of education." As a consequence of this identification, according to Wilson, I fail to understand or answer "the question of *what* is to be learned" (Wilson's emphasis). In Wilson's view these are two serious errors because "the 'value' of education inheres in the contents of learning," or, again, in *what* is learned. According to Wilson, then, my argument must be faulted for wrongly limiting the concept of education within the parameters of philosophy, and, consequently, of unjustifiably narrowing the range of what learning can be regarded as "valuable."

A part of the disagreement between Wilson and I is an artifact, I suspect, of the fact that we each adhere to very different views of what philosophy is. This question is too large to be dealt with here, and must await another occasion. Fortunately, I can respond to Wilson's criticisms without delving into this broader question.

Wilson does not really demonstrate that I have made the claims that he criticizes, but rather has criticized claims that he *conjectures* must represent my intentions. In doing so, he does not distinguish between my explicit concern with the philosophical question of what the value of education is, and his conjecture that I must be concerned with the value of what is learned in or as a part of education. These are two very different questions, and I am concerned with the former while Wilson is concerned with the latter. To clarify what I mean, consider his assertion that “the ‘value’ of education inheres in the content of learning. That does not make education a contestable concept: what is contested is the comparative importance of this or that contents.”

This is, I think, fundamentally wrong, and constitutes a misinterpretation of my argument. The question I am concerned with is not *whether* this or that content is regarded as valuable, but with the question of *why* (or according to what criteria) it is regarded as valuable. My point is precisely that “the contents of learning” – *what* students learn – must be and will always be determined by prior conceptions of the value of education that do not inhere in those contents. When reasoning about the value of what is learned in education, people do not begin with particular content that they think is valuable, and then, as it were, add the contents together and call the sum “the value of education.” On the contrary, they begin from a conception of the value of education, and then use that conception as the criterion according to which contents are selected and regarded as valuable. Consider two (admittedly very schematic) examples:

EDUCATIONAL
RADICAL

Step 1:

Education is valuable as a means for inculcating the knowledge and skills required for multicultural, egalitarian democracy.

Step 2:

The content of education will *therefore* include a deconstruction of Adam Smith, which is valuable because it liberates from capitalism, and so helps to bring about a multicultural, egalitarian political order.

EDUCATIONAL
CONSERVATIVE

Step 1:

Education is valuable as a means for inculcating the knowledge and skills required for a free-market liberal democracy.

Step 2:

The content of education will *therefore* include study of Adam Smith, which is valuable because it reaffirms an understanding of the merits of liberal capitalism, and so helps to bring about a free-market liberal political order.

In each of these cases, the content “reading Adam Smith” is regarded as valuable in education. The specific criterion of “valuable” is very different in each case, however, because that content is judged to be valuable according to two prior and very different conceptions of the value of education. It is not the case that, as Wilson claims, the value of education inheres in the content of what is learned. It is rather that the content of what is learned is selected and judged to be valuable before it ever becomes a part of education, in accordance with criteria of value to which the educator is committed. This is precisely why two so very different political societies can both value literacy as a part of education, and yet regard the content of literacy so differently. As my example of literacy in Nazi Germany in contrast to democratic Canada illustrates, we value literacy, or a particular form of it, not because any value inheres in the content of literacy, but because literacy is

defined and given its particular content in relation to prior, and in this case political, concepts of the value of education. In educational thought we do not ask whether the content of philosophy or mathematics or music are valuable without first having some criteria of value with reference to which we decide what is and what is not valuable about them, or in what form they are valuable. The question I am concerned with is the origin and justification of those prior criteria. It follows from this that the contesting of education is not fundamentally about the value of what is learned (though it can, and too often does, take that rhetorical form), but is rather about the prior criteria of value according to which *all* the contents of learning were selected and prioritized in the first place. I argue not that education is philosophy, and certainly not that philosophy alone is valuable in education, but that philosophy provides arguments for criteria of educational value, and a method for determining those criteria, that merit serious consideration, and offer an alternative to the prevailing political criteria and method.

Socratic Education

Wilson rightly points out that there are difficult questions to be asked about the specific content of the curriculum and goals of Socratic education. My paper, however, was concerned only with two specific philosophical questions, about the criteria and method of deciding what the value of education ought to be. The paper, therefore, cannot be fairly faulted, as Wilson does, for not addressing practical questions which are beyond its specified philosophical scope and intentions. There are, though, a couple of points that require a reply.

The prevailing accounts of the history of educational thought, especially in English-language academic circles, are almost wholly inaccurate in every important respect (Muir, 1996, 1998). To mention only one example, there has been, to my knowledge, no detailed and accurate account of Socratic educational thought written in this century. Moreover, most of the accounts now available (especially in the textbooks of Educational Studies) are vague and thoroughly inaccurate, obviously so to anyone who has carefully read, say, the whole of the *Republic*. Wilson (who *has* read the *Republic*) seems to have placed me in the context of these misrepresentations of Socratic educational thought and practice and, consequently, has attributed to me several features of these accounts which are not in fact found in

my paper. For example, Wilson attributes to me the claim that philosophical education will be concerned (Wilson's word) "only" with fundamental questions, or only with philosophy, and that the goal of Socratic education is only to produce "philosopher-kings." He argues that if this is what I claim, then I do not understand that there is a diversity of values and goals in education, and that the value of philosophy must be considered along with other valuable enterprises and modes of knowledge that ought to have a place in education. In his words, "there are other important things in human life, not only besides politics but besides philosophy," and therefore that

the real problem is how to adjudicate the values inherent in Socratic education with other values ... I imagine Muir would not deny that such things as an appreciation of music, literature and the arts, or the pursuit of various forms of thought (mathematics, science, history and so forth), have value in this way; so that the question arises of how much time we spend on these other such things rather than on philosophy.

But this is "the real problem," and this question arises, if and only if Wilson is correct to assume that I believe that Socratic education is or values only philosophy (or only fundamental questions) and "philosopher-kings." This assumption, however, is false, and there is no evidence for it in my paper. I certainly do not, for example, say or believe that the goal of Socratic (or Platonic) education is limited to, or in any way intended to produce, "philosopher-kings," as Wilson suggests. Similarly, turning from the goal of education to the curriculum, in Plato's *Republic* it is clear that philosophic education and the philosophic life in fact includes and values education in music, literature, and the arts, mathematics, science, history, and, finally but not exclusively, philosophy (e.g., *Republic*, Bks. 2-5), and that the philosophers it produces constitute a community quite distinct from political community. Indeed, in the context of contemporary cut backs to what our politicians call frills in education, such as the arts, I would argue that Socratic educational thought (and practice) provides arguments for the educational value of music, literature, and the arts, for example, that the prevailing (Isocratic) political conception of educational value has conspicuously failed to provide. In other words, I agree entirely with the criticisms that Wilson has made of the claims he has attributed to me, but deny that these claims can be found in anything I (or Plato) has written.

Conclusion

I am grateful to John Wilson for helping me to see more clearly that we must carefully distinguish between the question of what the value of education is, and the derivative question of what is valuable *in* education, and to understand that what we value in education – the content of what is learned, for example – will be wholly determined by what we think the value of education is. I do not suggest that philosophy, or the preparation for it, are somehow to be valued exclusively *in* education. I argue only that philosophy (Socrates) and political doctrine (Isocrates) provide the two alternative criteria and methods for deciding what the value of education ought to be, and that the philosophic criteria and method as put forward by the Socratics has disappeared from contemporary academic educational thought and now merits recovery and re-evaluation. Certainly, at the very least, we need some awareness of the dominance of Isocrates in contemporary educational thought and practice, and some knowledge of the Socratic arguments against, and alternative to, the Isocratic legacy. This is not because I am convinced that the Socratic alternative is superior, though that is possible. My intention is only to recover the Socratic view of educational value, and to explicate its challenge to the dominant Isocratic conception of the value of education, with the intention of reviving concern with, and genuinely informed and therefore free debate about, what the value of education ought to be. Without detailed knowledge of what the fundamental questions are, and of the fundamental alternative answers to those questions that history offers, there can be no free thought or debate: this is the situation we face in contemporary educational thought, and educational reformers of *all* political persuasions have a vested political (and professional) interest in keeping that way. John Wilson and I are in agreement in deplored this state of affairs and its dreadful consequences for education and educators, and in regarding philosophy as *necessary* to any remedy.

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