Phil Smith Lecture

WHERE IS PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION TODAY:
AT THE START OF A NEW MILLENNIUM
OR AT THE END OF A TIRED OLD ONE?
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When I first drafted this title, I meant it in a tongue in cheek way: half the academic papers you've seen for the past two years have made some sort of reference to their position at the cusp of two eras, as if suddenly, just because the calendar clicks over, all our ideas are supposed to change. Then, suddenly on September 11, this cliche gained new meaning: if a new era began, it wasn't on January 1, but on that date. And it no longer seems just a rhetorical device to ask how the events on that day, and those to follow, have highlighted the urgency of asking ourselves what our work has to offer in coming to grips with the growing dangers of this emerging world. For the field of education, centrally focused on the development of people who must live and work in that world, business as usual is harder and harder to accept.

For the field of philosophy of education, which has been traditionally expected to say something interesting and important about what education is for, the challenge is especially difficult because at no time in its history, in this country at least, has it been so unsure of the foundations on which it could base educational prescriptions. The issue is not simply a matter of postmodern suspicions about metanarratives, although that certainly characterizes many thinkers in this field; it is that the very eclecticism of the field of philosophy of education today — in many ways a sign of its vitality — has made it impossible to speak definitively of *the* philosophy of education, as if this carried some sort of general authority. Individual philosophers of education, working alone or within the relatively homogeneous sub-communities (isms) of this field, still carry on as if the basic normative questions of how and why we educate have been settled, leaving only the issues of how to pursue those aims more successfully — others, from different perspectives, criticize the social or institutional impediments that frustrate those aims. Yet at a time when traditional answers and institutions seem to rest, literally, on shaky grounds, this seems a terribly complacent response: that we just need to do what we have been trying to do all along, only better. Today I will explain why I think that is no longer good enough.

I.

Nothing that happened on September 11 was unprecedented. Terrorism and fundamentalism, topics which have been filling the airwaves and the pages

of news publications in the United States with expressions of shock and horror, are hardly news to people around the rest of the world; but the particular ways in which those threats are being defined here, and the range of responses that have been formulated to deal with them, reveal a great deal about the myths under which this society has been operating — and in many ways continues to operate, even in the aftermath of these events. Perhaps the time has come to reexamine those myths.

If "terrorism" means anything, it certainly includes flying a hijacked airplane into one of the most famous (and heavily populated) buildings in the world, under the gaze of live camera coverage. It also includes walking into a crowded pizza parlor with explosives studded with nails strapped to your body. But why is the term applied to hijacked aircraft, but not to cruise missiles? Was our bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki a terrorist act? Why aren't poverty and starvation classified as terrorist acts — it is certainly a terror to suffer them. What about gruesome diseases that we have the means to cure, but which people die from around the world in vast numbers (dwarfing the death count in New York City) because no one is willing to spend the money to provide them treatment? Why are deaths due to intentional acts called murder or genocide, while those resulting from "mere" neglect are often accepted as tragic but unavoidable?

"Fundamentalism" is, similarly, interpreted and applied in a selective way: Islamic clerics calling for a jihad against the United States and the West are despised as hateful, irrational enemies of freedom. But when Jerry Falwell accuses

> I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America. I point the finger in their face and say "you helped this happen"

it is decried more mildly by many of the same commentators as "inappropriate" or "not constructive when the country is trying to come together." It is not generally recognized as part of a rhetoric that leads people to bomb health clinics, assassinate doctors, or kidnap and murder homosexuals — namely, some of our forms of domestic terrorism. Nor, his apologies notwithstanding, do people want to acknowledge that when Falwell says "I really believe" this, it means he *really does* believe it, even if he now regrets having said it.

Here is a definition of fundamentalism: believing that your group or point of view is entirely right, and that your opponents are evil and totally wrong. Viewed in this way, fundamentalism seems much less foreign; we see it, for example, in Falwell, and we see it in the very response of the U.S. government

and much of the popular media to the terrorist attacks themselves — they were "pure evil," they were "irrational," etc. The *reasons* for the hatred that motivated these attacks, the historical grievances against the U.S. and the West generally of the religious groups and nations that sponsored them, are unimaginable to many U.S. observers, not because acknowledging them would justify what was done, but because it would humanize the attackers and complicate the moral judgments about who feels under threat by whom and who has suffered more at whose hands. Fundamentalism from outside our borders will never be as great a threat to our educational values as is fundamentalism within our own society.

<center>II.</center>

One response to these attacks, then, has been to demonize the attackers; to regard them as less than human ("animals" was frequently heard in the days following the attack). This can only have the effect of confirming in the minds of their surviving associates and sympathizers that the U.S. is implacably hostile to their culture and values, that it is willfully ignorant of their religious convictions, and that it is racist in labeling *their* fundamentalisms as brutal and intolerable, while it excuses or tolerates the fundamentalisms of its own.

Another response, of course, is retaliation — always couched in the guise of "justice" or "deterrence," but at the same time issuing forth from the same wellspring of atavistic anger and hatred that, one might suggest, is the common species trait that joins all such endeavors in an endless cycle of resentment and revenge.

Yet another response is to withdraw to the shelter of a "gated community": an enclave that tacitly writes off the fate of much of the rest of the world, but seeks to maintain a false sense of safety and insularity behind its ever-growing walls and defense forces. Some of these communities are neighborhoods with walls, gates, and private police; some are nations. But if recent events should have convinced us of anything, it is that withdrawal and insularity are no longer options, and that no wall of defense is insurmountable. The illusion that they ever were, ironically, had the effect of exacerbating the very dynamics of complacency, ignorance, and neglect that made people in fact much more susceptible to attack.

I am sketching the picture here of a society so committed to a sense of its own self-righteousness and superiority that, when confronted with a serious threat, it can only imagine responses to it that actually reinforce and exacerbate the very sources of opposition to itself. This is a failure on many levels, but it is a particular failure of education, since whatever else education should do, it should broaden our understanding of other people, it should enlarge our capacity to imagine nonviolent solutions to complex social problems, and it should

sensitize us to the long term as well as short term consequences of our actions and choices. What has happened to our society's understanding of "education" that has so impoverished our ability to respond intelligently and imaginatively to the changed circumstances of this new era?

III.

Despite the eclecticism of philosophy of education today, and the many schools of philosophical thought and method that have prevailed during its long tradition (beginning at least with Socrates and Plato), one question seems to recur: What does it mean to be an "educated" person? Whatever it might mean in specific method or content, education seems generally to refer to a process of human development or betterment: achieving a heightened capacity for thought and action that in some sense brings forth the best potentials of a human's nature. As R.S. Peters famously said, it would be a strange thing to say that someone was educated, but was the worse for it; or to put it the other way around, if we did think a person was the worse for it, we would label it "mis-education," with a better or truer sense of education at least tacitly in mind. That last point is worth emphasizing, because there are numerous criticisms in the literature of actual educational practices or institutions — that they promote hegemonic ideologies, that they are inequitable or biased against certain groups, that they stultify the expression of certain identities or cultural values, and so on — and in this sense "education" is harming people. But the philosopher is quick to point out that these very criticisms of actual educational practices or institutions proceed, must proceed, from at least tacit alternative conceptions of what education ought to be.

Today, in this country, I think that the predominant answers to this question, what it means to be an educated person, are particularly shallow and ill-conceived. The ways in which the question normally gets asked virtually guarantee that nothing very interesting will be taken into consideration.

One predominant position is a virtually unquestioned vocationalism and careerism; the scope of education is delimited by the knowledge and skills necessary to find a job. Public investments in schooling, and private decisions about how much schooling to pursue, and where, are governed by the unquestioned premises of human capital theory: education is an investment, rewarded for society by increased productivity and rewarded for the individual by increased earning power.

Another predominant position today defines educational attainment by test performance, on tests that assess an exceedingly narrow range of knowledge and skills. There is nothing wrong with testing or other forms of evaluating learning, although not all important educational outcomes can be tested in this

way. But in a bizarre twist, rather than design and apply tests only for those educational outcomes for which they are well suited, our society has truncated its conception of educational outcomes largely in terms of what its tests can measure. And so of course "teaching for the test" becomes standard practice, while nontestable educational aims get pushed further and further to the margins of what gets taught, or do not get taught at all.

Yet another predominant position is one variety or another of E.D. Hirsch's "cultural literacy," an unapologetic defense of "core" knowledge that every educated person should know. To be fair, his account is meant to be a corrective to rampant vocationalism, and it does contain many things that it is good to learn, but I mention it here as emblematic of the way that the question "What is an educated person?" gets asked today. In a performance-driven culture, educational aims must be translated into components that can be pursued systematically and checked off as criteria of attainment: read *Romeo and Juliet*, check! learn three causes of the Civil War, check! identify the atomic weight of carbon, check! Now you're an educated person.

I don't need to belabor for this audience how *anti*educational these positions are, nor the reasons why they have become so predominant today. Philosophy of education doesn't have any special insights into the sources of these prejudices; to an extent they are responses to certain broad-scale failures and shortcomings within the current educational system. But what philosophy of education can offer is a set of reminders of what being an educated person *might* mean, and a range of alternative answers that can help keep our thinking a little less static, a little less conventional, a little less business as usual.

IV.

For the Greek thinkers we encounter most frequently in educational theory — Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle — education was about the fulfillment of the potentials that make us distinctively human. The Greek term *arête*, often translated as "virtue," also meant "excellence," and one of the legacies of this tradition for our thinking about education today is the notion that education means "becoming all that you can be." For Plato, education for excellence meant very different things for different people, because he believed that human potentialities were not evenly distributed. Aristotle on the other hand believed that insofar as we are part of one species, the defining human capacity, reason, must be present in all of us, and so virtue or excellence was measured against a common set of broad standards. And, of course, this debate, about whether being an educated person means attaining a commonly shared set of characteristics, or whether it might mean fundamentally different kinds of outcomes for different people, is a debate still with us.

During the Renaissance, there was little debate about this issue; it was widely assumed that being educated meant the cultivation of very definite knowledge and abilities — broad and encompassing, as in the wide range of knowledge across different fields expressed in Hirsch's lists, but covering quite specific areas that anyone aspiring to be educated would have to master. Moreover, during this period, education included the cultivation of manners, tastes, and sensibilities; it meant becoming a person who acted in certain ways, and not just someone who knew certain things. In this sense, then, anyone who was educated could feel comfortable in the company of other educated people.

Later, during the Enlightenment, two views coexisted that each have had major influences on the ways we think about education today. One, which is what people usually *refer* to as the "Enlightenment" view, concerns the cultivation of reason as the basis for human flourishing. In a sense, this hearkens back to Aristotle's conception, except that for the Enlightenment rationalists, the development of reason was fundamental to the development of all other human excellences: reason was the basis for effective political organization, for enacting the role of the public citizen, for communication, for morality, even (on some views) for religious belief. As important as reason was for Aristotle, he never believed that it was the basis of all virtue. Less frequently discussed, however, is that the Enlightenment was also a period of an emerging romanticism that was quite hostile to the elevation of reason as the basis for all human development. In Western educational theory this romantic view has been at least as influential as the rationalist view; and in the various forms of progressivism and neoprogressivism that Dewey, Neill, and their followers favored, education rests on very different assumptions about human nature and what it means to give expression to it.

In many respects, philosophy of education throughout the 20th century has continued to play out these opposing conceptions of what an educated person ought to be. More rational or analytic traditions, including many varieties of liberal thought, believed that the development of an autonomous reason was a necessary condition of human freedom; and that impediments to that development — a strong reliance on authority for knowledge and judgment, embracing popular misconceptions or oversimplifications, or failing to subject beliefs to rigorous scrutiny — were all ways of remaining ensnared in ignorance and passivity. Becoming an educated person meant becoming more rational, and that meant becoming more free; a better educated society meant a better organized, more liberal and just one.

The romantic tradition, equally influential during this last century, I have suggested, began with an assumption of a "natural" human freedom that does not need to be grounded on reason or anything else; a freedom that is threatened by excessive constraints in the educational process, and often threatened by

social norms and conventions themselves. This natural freedom and human nature constitute a resource for educational development, if they are not suppressed or distorted — a natural curiosity, for example, or a natural tendency toward sociability. Becoming an educated person begins with the aim of preserving and extending these natural traits; and any system of education that ignores or squelches these freedoms is to be condemned. We see this romanticism alive today in views as diverse as Deweyan progressivism and whole language approaches to reading.

One variety of contemporary educational thought that keeps this Enlightenment duality present, and can take either form, is the cluster of views often termed "radical" or "critical" educational theory. While these views ostensibly offer a critique of what it means to be "educated" (that is, a critique of what society, through its ideologies and institutions, *promulgates* as an image of the educated person), these theories do so from within a set of assumptions, whether they are made explicit or not, of alternative conceptions of what it means to be an educated person — and often these conceptions derive from the same Enlightenment strains of rationality or romanticism. For critical theories derived from Marxism, including those in the mode of the Frankfurt School, the critique of educational ideologies or the "rationalities" that dictate educational policies and practices tacitly proceeds from a position of more complete reason — one that diagnoses these distortions or inequities and remains outside of them. An educated person here is one freed from such illusions and "hegemonies," and the comparison with certain forms of psychoanalysis has often been made. For the species of critical theory sometimes termed "critical pedagogy," the sources of critique and the alternative image of an educated person derive much more from romanticist presuppositions: individuals and groups are oppressed, which both denies their basic freedom and distorts the development of their basic capacities for goodness, creativity, and collectivity. Education needs to be made less repressive. Some varieties of critical feminism and critical multiculturalism embrace similar assumptions: to become educated, in these alternative visions, is to be left alone to create the kinds of personal relationships and to carry out the types of projects that *express* and *satisfy* the distinctive character of one's identity and group affiliation.

Postmodernism, in at least some of its contemporary forms in educational theory, can be seen as the ultimate flourishing of romanticism. A rejection of all metanarratives, if one means it seriously (and I am not sure that all postmodern advocates do), is a rejection of system, order, and universalism: it belies an implicit faith in human spontaneity and creativity. Strong theories of difference seem to assume that the free expression of identity and group affiliation is necessarily threatened by encounters that attempt to compare, judge, or bridge any of these differences; it is better to leave them preserved because encounters

with an unrecognized other are thought to have inherently edifying potential. Postmodernism elevates the value of human self-formation and will, and regards the prospective dangers of that exercise as less risky and harmful than the dangers of normalization, regulation, and reason.

Each of these traditional and contemporary answers to what it means to be an educated person poses to some degree a critical contrast to the truncated positions, discussed earlier, that have become predominant today (vocationalism, test-driven out-comes, or a narrow Hirschian canon). They each pursue the issue of educational aims in the context of a serious inquiry into what counts as human goodness, what constitutes a life worth living, and what promotes human freedom. If their particular answers may seem less than adequate today — and I would argue that this is so — they nevertheless offer visions of the educated person that have the capacity to inspire and direct human effort, which any lengthy educational journey will require. Identifying an endpoint to this process in relation to becoming a certain kind of person is the sort of vision and rationale for education that philosophy of education has been traditionally expected to provide. Vocationalism, test-driven outcomes, and a Hirschian canon, on the other hand, can only be justified in instrumental terms, both from the standpoint of the individual learner and from the standpoint of society generally.

V.

What might constitute an alternative vision of an educated person, and how might it be responsive to the changed circumstances of the world today?

First, in contrast with demarcating a specific body of knowledge that an educated person must master, this ideal should be oriented around the capacities and dispositions of learning itself. While formal institutions that are under pressure to become more accountable for their "success" have responded to this pressure by becoming increasingly stipulative about what students are expected to learn, and increasingly technical and impersonal in documenting that, the broader educational ideal of learning, and learning to learn, is actually hindered as a result. No one can stipulate the knowledge that will be necessary for a happy and successful life, and it is not going to be the same knowledge for everyone in all circumstances. Hirsch defends his canon by saying that it establishes a shared set of cultural reference points that allow people to communicate more effectively by giving them a common store of facts, characters, quotations, and other allusions to draw from in conversation. This benefit is not trivial, but it is still instrumental in nature. Moreover, despite his best efforts in making his lists more culturally pluralistic, they still reinforce the traditions and beliefs of a "Euro-American" history and culture — which important as it may be is inadequate today for the more cosmopolitan outlook and vocabulary needed for living and working in a global world. That world

continually presents us with the need to acquire new knowledge and understandings, which is why developing capacities for curiosity, for flexibility in thinking in different ways, and for being able to incorporate new ideas and changing circumstances into a reflective outlook, are the real "fundamentals" of learning today. Learning any canonical body of knowledge is more the grist for exercising those capacities than it is an end in itself; and so the actual content of what is "mastered" is less crucial than fostering the ability, and interest, in learners to continually grow beyond such "mastery."

A second dimension of this ideal of an educated person, just mentioned, is a certain kind of cosmopolitanism—to be, literally, a citizen of the world. The cosmopolitan ideal goes back to the Greeks and Romans; but for them, and throughout most of its history, this educational goal has been framed within a broader urge toward empire. The Greeks and Romans certainly thought it was important to learn about other cultures and nations, but with the motive of better managing the affairs of empire and commerce. They certainly were not interested in rethinking fundamental elements of their own cultures, which they knew were superior. Similarly, today, the rhetoric of globalization within the U.S. is primarily linked with our nation's interest in lowering barriers of cultural conflict and establishing a framework for negotiating deals and promoting the uninhibited flow of people, ideas, and goods and services worldwide (that is, by and large, *our* people, ideas, goods, and services). An *educational* cosmopolitanism, on the other hand, would emphasize other sorts of purposes. It would stress trying to appreciate the beliefs, values, and desires of others even when these are markedly different from our own, and trying to imagine how differently others might view situations, or view us.

This aim is markedly different from most forms of "multicultural education," because it acknowledges significant differences, disagreements, and conflicts between cultures; it is neither a "celebration of differences," nor an exoticization of them as something interesting and colorful, nor a path toward synthesizing or assimilating them. In today's world, large gulfs of disagreement and disaffection typify many ethnic, national, and religious differences, both within and across nations, and an educated person must be realistically aware of these frictions, must have some idea of where they came from, and must be to the extent possible willing and able to set aside their particularistic perspective for the sake of imagining why another person or group might view matters so differently. Is *this* a culturally generalizable ideal? I think that if it is not, then education itself ceases to have meaning in any normative sense.

A third dimension of this ideal, linked with the preceding concern, is to foster a moral character that is not fundamentalist. This is not as simple as it sounds. Fundamentalism as I have described it here involves attitudes of moral superiority and dichotomous judgments of right and wrong. The moral attitude

I am describing depends much more on perspective-taking, on feeling strong ties of commitment and affiliation with one's own moral community, *without* cementing these through contrast with, or opposition to, others. Viewed this way, the danger of being fundamentalist about one's values and principles is much more typical, much less "extreme," than it is normally represented to be — and if we are honest we see elements of this in our own moral attitudes and judgments all the time.

Fourth, I do not think there is any reason to be especially hostile or suspicious against the value of reason itself. Reasoning has proven itself to be a valuable way of thinking through many kinds of human problems — although not all kinds of human problems. The danger of rationality is to be defined as the basis for all human knowing, value, or social interaction, and in many accounts it does have the tendency to "colonize" other modes of thought and feeling. But the wholesale rejection of reason (which is in most cases rhetorical and cannot be seriously meant) is not a tenable view. Post September 11, such rhetoric seems especially reckless and counterproductive. I for one do not want to be aligned with the enemies of reason today.

But I also think that we need to think about reason in terms of a constellation of ways of thinking, not a single Master Discourse or an expression of some essential human nature. Human practices are diverse, and they are not all modeled on the standards of scientific investigation or law. Nevertheless, they *are* ordered on intersubjective norms of communication and predictability, and they must be, insofar as they are sustainable practices at all. Teasing out these implicit norms, appreciating their diversity, but also recognizing in them a general human tendency toward organization and inquiry, is a central task for education.

A fifth dimension of this ideal is a certain attitude toward the problems and challenges of life. Pragmatists call this a problem-solving disposition, but I think it is more complex than that. Lifelong learning, to say nothing of simply managing the affairs of daily life, requires approaching such challenges as an opportunity for reflecting on our purposes and goals, and often rethinking them. "Solving" a problem means that we know what we are trying to accomplish, and that once we have done so matters are settled. But the circumstances of this new era, as I have described it, present us with much more complex and ambiguous problems—problems that are never "solved" but at best coped with; problems that sometimes make clear that the issue is not the situation that is frustrating our aims, but the nature of those aims themselves.

This attitude also entails a particular sensitivity to the possibility—I would say the likelihood—that our efforts in addressing certain types of problem sometimes end up only making them worse, or giving rise to unanticipated

consequences that constitute new problems themselves. The modesty and sense of caution fostered by such an attitude should make it harder to see problems in merely technical terms, or to see our actions and policies as simple means-ends instruments. This is true for individuals, and it is especially true for broader communities and societies; it helps explain why we so rarely ever get the results that we want from our decisions without also getting results that we never wanted or expected. An educated person should have the wisdom to understand this, and to make decisions, without feeling paralyzed, in full awareness of the uncertainty of human planning and control.

These sets of characteristics no more than sketch the broad outlines of a conception of an educated person. I have not tried to justify these values by saying that they are intrinsically good or that they manifest some innate human nature or potential. Rather, I am suggesting only that they better equip one to cope with a world that is complex, diverse, and rapidly changing. Many crucial questions remain unaddressed here: what sorts of specific educational experiences would tend to foster these traits; how they might be developmentally shaped (presumably one cannot expect five year-olds to look at the world this way); and how and whether they might be compatible with other worthy educational goals. I am certain that these values cannot be fostered merely through a formal school curriculum; other educational influences, particularly the popular media and family upbringing, would need to be compatible with these aims (and of course generally speaking they are not).

But the ideal of an educated person serves a critical as well as a constructive purpose: not only in inspiring and guiding educational efforts, but in identifying by contrast antieducational ones. All that I have suggested here is that this ideal represents a sharp point of departure from traditional, and contemporary, ideals about what education should help us become; and that it seems to me a better set of attitudes and dispositions for coping with the particular challenges of this world today, and the world it seems to be becoming.[1]

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the College of Education, University of Illinois, Urbana/Champaign. Thanks to colleagues there for suggestions that have helped to improve it.