Philip Kitcher

The Main Enterprise of the World: Rethinking Education

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Philip Kitcher's Deweyan vision of education is immensely ambitious, ranging as it does over the fields of philosophy of education, moral philosophy, political philosophy, and economics; and addressing both underlying theory and practical policy implications. The book is structured in three sections.

Part I identifies educational aims. Kitcher argues that predominant 'liberal' conceptions of education are deficient in seeking to incorporate all aspects of human knowledge in the curriculum. We must start afresh and return to the central questions posed by Socrates, namely, 'How should *I* live?' and 'How should *we* live together?' These suggest that we radically modify liberalism's traditional emphasis on 'the autonomy condition' and conceive individual fulfilment as arising from activities that benefit the lives of others and promote the common good – 'the community condition'. Out of this arise three general aims of education: a capacity for self-maintenance, citizenship, and a fulfilling life – but all conceived within a deeper 'Deweyan' vision of democracy, in which mutual engagement, inclusive deliberation, and cooperation are the central facts of good citizenship. Education should therefore foster collaborative decision-making and cooperation from an early age; and moral development and moral education should centre on developing our sensitivity to the perspectives of others. At the same time, fulfilment requires that individual pupils' 'predilections, talents, and interests' are cultivated, so that they might find a satisfying vocation in a society where the contributions of all citizens are valued. To this end, an army of adults should be recruited as classroom aides to ensure that 'embryonic tastes' are identified.

Part II considers the curriculum that would instantiate Kitcher's proposed educational aims. Those pupils who are not going on to become research scientists should receive a general scientific education that might stimulate a lifelong interest in science and at the same time prepare them for citizenship. The arts and crafts should form a central part of the curriculum, with careful attention given to cultivating pupils' individual talents and interests, thereby enriching

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their creative and aesthetic lives as adults. The humanities, notably literature and history, should be harnessed to develop pupils' moral sympathy, empathy, and general sensitivity to the needs of others. And the social sciences should be incorporated in the curriculum for their capacity to cultivate self-understanding, as well as to introduce pupils to the basic probabilistic and statistical tools needed to appraise scientific evidence and generally make better judgements.

Part III considers the social changes that would be necessary for the suggested educational reforms to be implemented. Kitcher argues that only in a 'Deweyan society' would this be feasible – that is, a society 'far more egalitarian' than existing societies, even than the social democracies of Scandinavia. Work would be judged solely on its 'advancing the common good', its social usefulness, and on a person's devotion to their role, however humble. Instead of a harsh meritocracy, there would be equality of respect, and radically curbed inequality of income. Hierarchies of status would be eliminated, as would stereotypes and racial, ethnic, and cultural prejudices. Economic growth and productivity would cease to be the dominant forces in the economy. Work patterns would be reformed to allow regular educational leaves for all, so that education becomes 'a lifetime venture'. The elimination of 'useless work' (such as advertising), the curbing of conspicuous consumption in the form of status goods (such as 'brand-name clothing and personal ornaments'), and the reduction of the overblown defence budget (in the case of America), would help free resources to fund a massive increase in the resources devoted to education, at all levels.

Kitcher is to be commended for taking a fresh look at the school curriculum and exploring how it might instantiate the educational aims that we, as a society, most value. There are many stimulating ideas in this book, and there is much material that would be of interest to philosophers of education and to educationalists more generally. I thought, for example, that the idea of putting much more emphasis on identifying pupils' individual talents, aptitudes, and interests from early on, modifying the curriculum so that pupils could pursue those arts and crafts, and other activities, which they most enjoyed, and then later revisiting the activities they had earlier opted out of, was original and might – if it could be operationalised in practical curriculum terms – transform pupils' lives for the better. The argument for a general science curriculum is also much needed – though Kitcher is not the first educationalist to propose this.

However, to evaluate a book as a work of philosophy of education, of philosophical analysis, we need to apply criteria and standards other merely than freshness of approach, and the presence of original ideas or novel suggestions

– welcome though these may be. And it is here, I am afraid, that Kitcher's book falls seriously short on multiple fronts.

The first weakness of the book is its vast scope. The attempt to mount a comprehensive philosophical justification – educational, moral, social, political, and economic – of a new vision of society *and* outline a reformed school curriculum is inevitably going to lead to cursory treatment of much of the subject matter. The problem is compounded by frequent and sometimes lengthy excursus into subject matter in which Kitcher may have specific expertise or interest (such as scientific epistemology, evolution, the role of religion, and his personal encounters with high art), but which are not particularly relevant to the book's main arguments.

The second weakness is that, aside from John Dewey and footnoted references to those philosophers who reviewed the book (Meira Levinson, Harry Brighouse, Randall Curren and Martha Nussbaum), there is minimal engagement in the text with existing discourses in the field of philosophy of education, or with the contributions of other philosophers and educationalists to the book's central questions. Kitcher argues that what is needed is 'a vision of the whole' (p. 47), 'a more abstract, "philosophical" stance' (p. 36) than philosophers of education, and educationalists generally, have hitherto been able to provide. But in setting out to provide this himself, and finally confront 'the problem of overload' (p. 46), Kitcher does so as if he is the first to broach the subject of curriculum reform, and the only person to have anything fruitful to say on the matter. This is unfortunate because the engagement with existing discourses and scholarly research within the field of philosophy of education, and other relevant disciplines, would have enabled Kitcher to organise, develop, and articulate his arguments more cogently. As it stands, there are simply too many gaps, too many failures to address crucial questions, and a general lack of care and precision in defining key terms or in developing arguments.

The third weakness is that of poor exposition. Kitcher's arguments are often muddled and difficult to follow. The impression is more of a stream of thoughts than of arguments carefully organised and elaborated. There is also a lot of repetition, which should have been edited out. Had its arguments been developed with much greater concision, the book would have been much improved.

The fourth weakness concerns style and tone. Kitcher's manner tends toward the magisterial. He is dismissive of those who would question, or criticise, his vision; and on occasion, his impassioned argument degenerates into little more than rant. If Kitcher's book had been subtitled 'a personal view' or 'personal

reflections', for example, there would have been no problem. But in a work of philosophy, we look for care, precision, balance, reasoned argument, justification, and a touch of humility. References to 'the popular view' (pp. 137 & 139), 'the common judgement' (p, 257), or 'some thinkers' (p. 95) are much too vague to serve the purpose of serious analysis; statements like 'the riposte is predictable' (p.372) or 'the basic points are crushingly obvious' (p. 380) are distinctly unscholarly; and pejorative references to those who would question Kitcher's vision as 'cynics' (p. 372), and 'skeptics' (pp. 265, 347 and passim) are no substitute for a serious engagement with alternative perspectives and traditions. I would also add – and I speak here as a teacher – that Kitcher has a regrettable tendency to write as if nothing worthwhile is going on in existing schools and colleges concerning the cultivation of pupils' interests and latent talents, preparing pupils for worthwhile and satisfying vocations, or encouraging adults to develop their interests and talents, as on adult education courses. Casual references to 'schools offering no real chance' to pupils, unless they are privileged or middle class (p. 81), need to be handled with greater care, and preferably with greater first-hand experience of school education.

The following examples, necessarily highly selective, will serve to illustrate these points.

In Chapter 1 ('Overload'), Kitcher blames the 'liberal education' tradition for much of the current overload of the curriculum. But he takes John Stuart Mill's 'overloaded curriculum' encompassing all academic subjects as his sole exemplar of a rich and varied tradition that stretches back over 2000 years and that could be credited with forming Western civilization. John Henry Newman, a seminal figure, is briefly mentioned but summarily dismissed for being 'elitist'. There is no mention of the great rhetorical tradition of liberal education, whose aim was to produce, not universal knowledge, but citizens and orators (see, for example, Bruce Kimball's seminal *Orators and Philosophers*). And the only reference to the influential contemporary reformulation of the liberal ideal by the post-war 'London School' is to charge Michael Oakeshott and Richard Peters with conceiving education as the 'simple preservation of a past tradition' (pp. 229-30) – a caricature of their highly sophisticated positions, which some familiarity with their work would have avoided.

Kitcher acknowledges the argument that liberal education might 'inculcate psychological capacities and character traits', but he objects that we have no idea which aspects of a liberal curriculum are the crucial ones in this respect, and no means of finding out (p. 65). However, there is a considerable body of research in

philosophy of education, including by virtue epistemologists, into the skills, qualities, and virtues, be it intellectual, practical, or moral, that might be cultivated through education. 'Thinking skills' alone have been the object of a vast amount of research, and of debate. That nothing can be proved conclusively or empirically concerning the human mind or character makes it all-the-more important that philosophers bring conceptual clarity to the issues and arguments involved.

There is also a vast corpus of work that questions the liberal tradition and seeks to reformulate the modern-day academic curriculum, along with its aims, some of which is highly pertinent to Kitcher's argument in this book. For example, Christopher Winch and Paul Hager have done notable work exploring how vocationally based education might contribute to ethical judgement, social obligation, autonomous agency, and personal fulfilment; and in *An Aims-based Curriculum* of 2013, John White and Michael Reiss argue that central to school education should be the pupil's 'wholehearted and successful engagement' in intrinsically worthwhile activities – a proposal that closely parallels Kitcher's own. Kitcher's argument for an inclusive curriculum would have been strengthened had it incorporated vocational education (Dewey's education 'through occupations') as a means by which pupils not academically inclined might be prepared for fulfilled lives, rather than merely encouraging them to engage in various arts and crafts (pp. 271-2); and his analysis might have been sharpened had he made use of R.S. Peters' concept 'worthwhile activities' to identify those pursuits which have educational value. But there is no mention of these contributions, nor of any other proposals for reforming the curriculum, in Kitcher's book.

In Chapter 5 ('Moral Development'), Kitcher argues that moral education should centre on the cultivation of pupils' sensitivities to others. But his underlying premise – that morality derives primarily from the '*ur*-problem' of our 'limited responsiveness' to one another (p. 174), and that if only individuals could be educated, or conditioned, to be fully responsive to others, then all moral problems would vanish – is highly questionable. One need only consider the nature of moral conflict (for example, over abortion, where there are fundamental value differences) and of tragic dilemmas. And the notion that 'moral progress' would be furthered by 'an institution designed to uncover the wounds concealed by false consciousness' (p. 177) is far from being the 'obvious approach'. Kitcher dismisses all previous moral teaching and moral philosophy, 'the simple view of moral education', on the grounds that 'rigid moral codes' cannot be applied to new situations or complex problems (pp. 157-9) – but this is a caricature of what has gone before. Utilitarianism, consequentialism, and particularism are briefly summarised, but Kitcher makes no mention of virtue ethics, that other

great tradition of moral thought – and one that is highly influential in philosophy of education. Aristotle, its founder, is summarily dismissed as 'elitist' (p. 93), and 'ancient approaches to the good life' as incompatible with subsequent notions of liberal autonomy. Kitcher later introduces the term 'moral practice' to describe 'the psychological state moral education is supposed to instil' (p. 162). But he seems unaware that in moral philosophy, the term 'moral practice' refers not to a psychological state (whatever that means) but to a social or professional framework, an evolved tradition, for dealing with moral questions; and that in virtue ethics, it is most closely associated with the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, who conceives practices as mediating both the moral virtues and the intrinsic goods of a worthwhile life. But again, there is no reference to any of this in Kitcher's book.

Chapter 4 ('Citizens') develops the central unifying theme of the book, namely that democratic progress consists of moving toward a Deweyan 'deep' democracy. The current practice of 'group decision-making' and consequent 'oscillation of policymaking' (p. 145) that characterises conventional liberal and social democracies, would be replaced by the ideal of 'democratic deliberation'. But Kitcher takes no account of the possibility that there may be fundamental and legitimate differences in political belief – for example, that some citizens may not share Kitcher's ideal of the Deweyan society or of the common good. It is simply assumed that, provided they have been sufficiently educated in cooperative collaborative activity and morally developed to be 'fully' responsive to others, all individuals will come to some form of collective decision concerning, for example, how status goods or 'useless work' might be eliminated. Kitcher cites with approval Rabindranath Tagore's preference for 'widespread solidarity' over 'the conception of liberty as protection from the interference of others' (p. 141) – that is, for 'positive' over 'negative' liberty. But what we have arrived at here, in thinly disguised form, is *a collective society*, where individual wills are subsumed under the collective will or consciousness.

Although Kitcher acknowledges Hayek's critique of central planning in Chapter 11 ('Utopia'), there is no reference to Hayek's profound and wide-ranging critique of collectivist societies in *The Road to Serfdom* (and elsewhere) concerning their inability to accommodate the fundamental differences in individuals. Mill adduced the same arguments in his essay *On Liberty*: that the differences and 'diversities of taste' among human beings necessitates 'a corresponding diversity in their modes of life' if they are to develop mentally, morally, spiritually, and aesthetically. Robert Nozick puts individual differences at the centre of his defence of an 'entitlement' over a 'distributive' theory of justice in his *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. No question in political philosophy is more profound or difficult than that of how liberty can be balanced with equality;

but Kitcher seems oblivious to the dangers posed by his Deweyan vision to our individual liberties, and barely engages with it.

There is a long and convoluted excursus into macroeconomic theory in Chapter 11 which is intended to defend the Deweyan society from the charge that a lack of competitiveness would doom it to economic collapse. But because Kitcher makes no reference to Ricardo's doctrine of comparative costs, the fundamental economic principle that underlies international trade, his analysis has little substance *qua* economic theory.

In summary, this book is a *personal* view, a *personal* vision of a Deweyan society – and as such, it will hold considerable interest and value to educationalists, especially those sympathetic to Dewey's vision. But as a work of philosophy of education, as philosophical analysis, it falls far short of the accepted standards.

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