

## **CHAPTER 1: IDEALISM AND EDUCATION**

### DEVELOPMENT OF IDEALISM

#### DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN IDEALISM

#### IDEALISM AS A PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

#### CRITIQUE OF IDEALISM IN EDUCATION

Plato: **The Republic**

Kant: **Education**

## CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Idealists believe that ideas are the only true reality. They do not reject material reality, but hold that the material world is characterized by change, instability, and uncertainty, while ideas are enduring.

### DEVELOPMENT OF IDEALISM

The ideas of Socrates were transmitted orally through a dialectical question and answer approach. Plato wrote about and expanded many of them, and he encouraged a Socratic approach to thinking. He held that we should concern ourselves primarily with the search for truth. Since truth is perfect and eternal, it cannot be found in the material world of matter that is imperfect and constantly changing. Mathematics demonstrated that eternal truths were possible, and Plato believed that we must search for other universal truths in areas such as politics, religion, and education; hence, the search for timeless truth should be the quest of the true philosopher.

Plato did not think that people create knowledge; rather, they discover it through the dialectic. He proposed an education he thought would help develop a world where individuals and society are moved as far as they are capable toward the Good, and he suggested that the state must take a very active role in educational matters. He maintained that the curriculum should lead students from a concern with concrete data to higher abstract thought. Plato also believed that until philosophers were rulers, states would never pursue the highest ideals of truth and justice.

Idealism exerted a great influence on Christianity. The idea of God as pure Spirit and the Universal Good is compatible with idealism. Augustine was greatly concerned with the concept of evil and believed that man was continuously engaged in a struggle to regain purity. He accepted Plato's notion of the world of ideas and the world of matter, but he referred to the two worlds as the World of God and the World of Man. To religious idealists, ultimate reality is God, and our bridge to it is the mind or soul.

### DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN IDEALISM

Descartes explored "methodical doubt" and developed the idea of the *Cogito*, or "I think, therefore I am." He encountered the necessity of one idea referring to another, and he found it impossible to arrive at any idea that did not refer to something other than itself, except the idea of Perfect Being. Finite mind contemplates objects of thought founded in God, or in Platonic terms, the human mind contemplates the ultimate reality of ideas.

Berkeley held that all existence is dependent on some mind to know it, and nothing exists unless it is perceived by some mind. To say that a thing exists means that it is perceived, or *esse est percipi* (to be is to be perceived).

Hume concluded that all we can know are our own impressions and ideas; therefore, we have no adequate basis for asserting the reality of either material or spiritual things. Hume was a skeptic who held that we cannot discover anything that justifies necessary connection or causation. To connect one occurrence with another is merely the habit of expecting one event to follow another based on previous experience.

Kant accepted modern science, and he believed he had devised a new system with valid knowledge of human experience based on scientific laws. In his ethics and moral philosophy, he developed what he called moral "imperatives," such as to treat each person as an end and never as a mere means. To Kant, the important thing was to teach a child to think according to principles.

Hegel developed a system of logic he thought would correct the inadequacies of Aristotelian logic. He conceived of logical thought as a dialectical continuum that moves toward richer, more complete syntheses. To Hegel, history showed this movement just as logical thought processes did. He thought that in order to be truly educated, an individual must pass through the various stages of the cultural evolution of mankind.

Royce believed that ideas are essentially purposes or plans of action. Human purposes are incomplete without an external world in which they may be realized, and the external world is meaningless unless it is the fulfillment of such purposes.

## IDEALISM AS A PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Idealists generally agree that education should stress the development of the mind, and it should encourage students to focus on ideas of lasting value. Major emphases include the search for truth and the importance of mind over matter.

The concern for the individual is one of the main characteristics of idealism. Education should be concerned with self-realization, a central aim of idealist education, but the individual self is only a part of the whole and has meaning only in the larger context.

Idealists are also concerned with character development, and they believe that good education should make this a central goal. They believe that moral values need to be nurtured by schools and that educators have an obligation to present students with appropriate role models for emulation.

Idealists do not favor specialized learning as much as holistic learning and their curriculum is composed of a liberal arts approach with broad concepts rather than specific skills. Idealists stress that education at all levels should teach students to think, assist in the development of good character, and that teachers should maintain a constant concern for the ultimate purposes of learning.

## CRITIQUE OF IDEALISM IN EDUCATION

Points of strength in idealism include (1) the high cognitive level of education idealists promote, (2) the concern for safeguarding and promoting cultural learning, (3) concern for morality and character development, (4) a view of the teacher as a person of respect central to the educational process, (5) the importance of self-realization, (6) a stress on the human and personal side of life, and (7) a comprehensive, systematic, and holistic approach toward education and a study of the world.

Some critics argue that the idealist notion of a finished and absolute universe waiting to be discovered has hindered science and the creation of new ideas. If one accepts the concept of absolute ideas, it is not possible to go beyond them. While idealists have emphasized the cognitive side of life, they have sometimes emphasized intellectualism to the detriment of students' affective and physical development, and some critics maintain that the idealist approach tends to promote intellectual elitism.

One thing championed by idealists is that they give more attention to character development than do advocates of other philosophies. Their critics note, however, that the idealist view of character development sometimes promotes conformity and subservience on the part of learners.

## PROJECTS

1. Form a group and consider how an ideal society might be achieved through education. Keep in mind that in Plato's ideal society all things were interwoven: education, government, and social life. Decide what role

education should play in an ideal society.

2. Examine various school curricula and educational aims in your community for their commitment to idealist principles, such as character development and higher social purposes. Determine the central ideas that give focus to these materials. Are the curriculum plans helpful? What are the strengths and weaknesses you detect, and what suggestions can you make for improvement?

## IDENTIFICATIONS

the Academy  
Doctrine of Reminiscence  
***Confessions***  
***Critique of Practical Reason***  
deduction  
Allegory of the Cave  
dialectic  
Transcendentalism  
*De Magistro*  
Absolute Spirit  
Temple School

## DISCUSSION AND ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Discuss Plato's definition of truth. Why does he maintain that truth is eternal and perfect? How do most people feel about truth today? Is truth relative or is it absolute?
2. How did Plato view democracy? How did these views influence his ideas on education? Can democracy be justified from an idealist perspective? Why or why not?
3. Discuss ideas for order and control in the schools as recommended by William T. Harris. How do these recommendations accurately reflect idealist philosophy? Do these ideas have merit in today's schools? Explain your position.
4. Why do idealists cast doubt on the merits of studying the material world? How do idealists react to the emphasis on technical and specialized education in schools today? Consider this idealist view for its appropriateness to contemporary life.
5. What does Socrates mean by calling himself a gadfly? Should education seek to develop more such gadflies today?
6. Augustine maintains that we must believe in order to know, and that faith must transcend reason in order for us to enter the realm of true ideas. What are the implications of having to believe something in order to know it? How does this conflict with our current ways of teaching?
7. What does Kant believe is the proper punishment for a child who has lied? From your point of view is such punishment appropriate?



## **CHAPTER 2: REALISM AND EDUCATION**

### **CLASSICAL TRADITIONS**

### **DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN REALISM**

### **CONTEMPORARY REALISM**

### **REALISM AS A PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION**

### **CRITIQUE OF REALISM IN EDUCATION**

Aristotle: **The Politics and Ethics of Aristotle**

Locke: **Some Thoughts Concerning Education**

## **CHAPTER OVERVIEW**

### **CLASSICAL TRADITIONS**

Like idealism, realism is one of the oldest philosophies in Western culture and dates back to ancient Greece. It has had a variety of interpretations ranging from classical and religious realism to scientific, natural, and rational realism.

A central feature of realism is the thesis of independence, or the view that reality, knowledge, and value exist independently of the human mind. It rejects the idealist view that only ideas are real, and it asserts that material facts of the universe exist whether or not human minds actually perceive them. Realism holds that matter is an obvious example of an independent reality.

Aristotle maintained that a proper study of matter could lead us to better and more distinct ideas. He believed that ideas (or forms), such as the idea of God or the idea of a tree, can exist without matter, but there can be no matter without form. Each material object has both a universal and particular property, and forms (universals, ideas, or essences) are the nonmaterial aspects of particular material objects. We arrive at forms or ideas by examining specific material objects.

For Aristotle, there is order and purpose in the universe, and we can understand the universe by studying its purposes. With regard to humans, our purpose is to think, and when we refuse to think, we go against our purpose and suffer the consequences. Aristotle believed that a person should follow the Golden Mean, a life of moderation between extremes. An appropriate education would promote this kind of life.

Christian philosophers, such as Aquinas, correlated the realist thought of Aristotle with Christian beliefs and created the scholastic philosophy called "Thomism." By using our reason as Aristotle suggested, Aquinas held that we could know the truth about God and nature. He recognized that truth could be attained by revelation, but he also believed truth could be gained through sensory observation as well.

### **DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN REALISM**

Modern realism, which is associated with Francis Bacon and John Locke, took a decidedly empirical approach and served as a building block for modern science. This approach created conflicts between religious beliefs based on deduction and on scientific beliefs based on inductive thinking and observation. John Locke developed the view that most knowledge is acquired from experience by way of sensation and reflection.

### **CONTEMPORARY REALISM**

Contemporary realism, which is associated with Whitehead and Russell, attempted to correlate science and

philosophy. Whitehead argued that philosophy is simply a search for pattern in the universe, and Russell maintained that such patterns should be described with precision and analyzed mathematically.

## REALISM AS A PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

There are several varieties of realism that have affected education in diverse ways. The two major divisions are religious realism and scientific or secular realism. Thomists, for example, believe that education should help us understand both the spiritual and materials aspects of life, while secular realists emphasize material and scientific studies.

The scientific movement ushered in an era of thought that stressed an understanding of the material world and its control. There is order and regularity of the material world, and scientific investigation uncovers the "laws of nature" that govern this regularity. Secular realism maintains that reliable knowledge is gained through a study of essential ideas and facts about the material world.

Although secular realists argue that education should develop technical skills and turn out specialists and scientists, they are not necessarily opposed to education in the humanities. Realists also put great emphasis on the "practical" side of education, which may include education for moral and character development.

## CRITIQUE OF REALISM IN EDUCATION

Secular realist educational theory displays a bias in favor of a fact based approach to knowledge. Yet, what was once thought to be indisputable fact in so many cases is now considered to be interesting myth and outright ignorance, such as the Ptolemaic conception of the universe that was once supported by religious realism. Even the "laws" of modern physics, which have tremendous research and experimentation behind them, may fall to new laws and ideas in the future. There is also confusion over what is meant by "fact," for there are "facts of reason" and "facts of empirical research." Aristotle thought it was self evident that objects of different weights fall at different speeds. It was not until Galileo that this "fact of reason" was overturned by empirical research. The "factual" approach in both religious and secular realism may lead to closed mindedness and narrowness: if we already have the truth in hand, we are hardly motivated to search further. Such an outlook is anti-philosophical if it discourages an open mind and the unshackled search for wisdom.

## PROJECTS

1. Consider your experience in a laboratory class at your college or university. How is the scientific method used in achieving solutions? How do scientists prove the results of their theories, and does this provide sufficient knowledge for individual and social life?
2. Examine some of the covenants, creeds, or evangelical tracts of selected religious institutions, and critically compare them on their views of a scientific approach to truth. Compare them on such topics as the creation or origins of the universe, or the issue of abortion. How do religious thinkers justify their beliefs as compared with scientists? Do religious and scientific thinkers share any common features?
3. Examine selected textbooks used in schools in terms of viewpoints related to realism. What kinds of realism, if any, are represented? If realist views are present, what impact could this have on how pupils who use the texts view truth and knowledge?

## IDENTIFICATIONS

*tabula rasa*  
induction  
Ptolemaic conception of the universe  
Golden Mean  
syllogism  
Thomism

Lyceum  
*Principia Mathematica*  
*élan vital*  
"Angelic Doctor"  
*Casa dei Bambini*

### DISCUSSION AND ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Write an essay explaining the following:
  - a. A leading belief of realist thought and how it continues to influence educational practices.
  - b. A leading difference between religious and secular realism, and what role this difference plays in contemporary education.
  - c. A position on whether these influences are desirable or undesirable, and explain why.
2. Some observers argue that the realist position makes a strong plea for facts and basic subject matter. Discuss whether realism does promote this view. How sufficient is the realist approach on this issue for education today?
3. What is a key difference between deductive and inductive thinking? Write an essay evaluating how these ways of thinking developed in realism and how they influence the way we think about education.
4. Discuss Aristotle's view for leading a good life. What implications does this have for educational aims and curriculum, and how appropriate is it for present-day schools?
5. Discuss a leading difference between classical and modern realism. How does this difference manifest itself in education, particularly in the curriculum of today's schools? Is this manifestation a positive or negative feature?
6. According to John Searle, there is a difference between "brute facts" and "social facts." How does this view impact educational theory and practice?
7. What are some of the basic ideas and practices of a Montessori approach to education? What, in your view, are the positive and negative features of the "Montessori Method".