

# **Two Kinds of Responses to: Why must I learn this?**

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## Two Kinds of Responses to: Why must I learn this?

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1. It is sometimes not clear what sort of research belongs to the philosophy of education, and so I would like to begin by providing a brief sketch of the discipline and the nature of its research.

Philosophy of education is a branch of philosophy that is concerned with normative concepts, ideas and questions in Educational research. What is normative contrasts with the empirical (and descriptive). For example, within empirical research in education, one might ask: *When* can one begin to learn arithmetic? Presumably, it is quite plausible to make progress toward answering this question, drawing from cognitive science and any other relevant branch of empirical study, and, for instance, by conducting appropriate experiments. Now, even if it became determined-let us assume-that children, with relatively healthy cognitive functioning, can begin to study arithmetic at the age of three, one might still ask: Well, when should a child begin to study arithmetic? One can imagine many contexts-cultural, geographical, historical, and so forth-in which the study of arithmetic might best be postponed until a later age. Here we are already in the territory of philosophy of education; for, we must now *argue* for our answers, instead of pointing to the facts. Another example we can consider to make the contrast between empirical questions in education and normative ones more clear is to consider the difference between asking: What subjects are taught in elementary schools around the world? And: What subjects *ought* to be taught in elementary schools? Again, we must make arguments, including philosophical ones, to answer the latter question.

The arguments and questions become philosophical in educational research, most explicitly and obviously, at the point when the theories that we have about the goals, aims, or purposes of education begin to influence the ways that we answer

normative questions in education. Take the last example. If the question is, What subjects *ought* to be taught in elementary schools? a full answer to this question will reveal one's ideas about the goals of education, which will in turn draw upon one's normative views on society and politics, as well as ethics and morality. Thus, philosophy of education is quite interdisciplinary, in that it often draws upon moral and political theorizing, as well as research in psychology and linguistics, and other normative inquiries. From these considerations, it is no surprise that it is sometimes difficult to delineate the field of philosophy of education; but I hope that my remarks have helped make it a little clearer.

2. Now my research is within the philosophy of education, and I am especially interested in questions that relate to moral education. Recently, my research has focused on an experience with which nearly all teachers are familiar. Namely, the experience of being confronted with a question posed by the student: "Why must we learn this?" This question-why must I learn this?- may express the student's frustration with the sheer difficulty or abstractness of the subject matter, or it may reveal that the student sees the subject matter as completely outside of his or her interests. It is difficult to determine how a teacher might answer this question. It is likely that the student may be asking how the subject matter that is being taught practically relates to her life, that is, how it will be of use to her, promote her interests, or satisfy her desires. But it is also possible that the student may be asking a deep question: namely, the student may be asking the way in which learning the subject matter at hand is morally beneficial, valuable for a human life, valuable for social life, or how it might shed light on the meaning and purpose of the student's life.

As I said, it may not be obvious how a teacher might respond to the student's question. But what is clear is that the teacher's answer, if the teacher answers, does reveal his or her philosophy of education: that is, an answer would reveal, however implicitly or explicitly, his or her thoughts about the goals of education, the purpose of social life, and, most likely, ethics.

It is worth emphasizing this point: namely, as educators, since we are all faced with the student's question, we must participate in thinking philosophically about education. Secondly, since many of us can likely recall a moment at which we raised such a question ourselves, we can see that the moment when the student asks, Why must I learn this? is a significant moment in the student's education. How the teacher answers, or does not answer, will shape the student's experience and view of education. It is important, then, to think about the nature of the student's question, and how a

teacher might respond to it.

3. Now there are two senses in which we can understand the student's question, a practical sense and a moral sense. I will begin with a brief sketch of the practical sense and then turn to the moral<sup>1</sup> sense of the question. The two different senses in which we can interpret the student's question can be matched with two different ways in which to answer the question. Thus, the practical answer to the student's practical question would represent one kind of philosophy of education, while the moral answer to the student's moral question would represent another kind of philosophy of education. Of course, we can mix the answers, but for my purposes here I will keep the answers separate.

4. Why must I learn this? Why do we have to learn this? What is this good for? When this kind of question is taken in a practical sense, the student may be expressing a question about how what she is learning will be of any *use* to her. How will I use-or when will I ever need to use-what I am learning *now*? This practical question is typically encountered in advanced mathematics and certain subjects in social studies, for instance when the student is learning international history from a culture from the distant past. Following John Dewey (1916) and Jean Jacques Rousseau (1979) in a general way: it behooves a teacher to teach in such a way that the learning experience for the student always makes explicit the way that the learning material is useful to the student's present life and interests. The student must find the learning experience to be useful to her in the present. This is difficult to do; but it is true that students are eager to learn what they find useful and interesting in the present. But if, in spite of the teacher's best efforts, the student ask, Why must I learn this? Dewey (1916) and Jean Jacques Rousseau (1979) warn that educators must avoid promising and explaining to the students that what they are learning will be useful in the future, for students will most likely struggle to take an interest in the subject matter that purports to be useful in a future they cannot experience now. The difficult question, then, becomes: how, as teachers, can we present all learning material as practically useful in the present? There is of course volumes of literature on teaching methodology and curriculum plans that attempt to answer this kind of question, in each particular subject matter, but this perhaps risks putting too much emphasis on the practical experience of education.

5. Now, typically, the student is not asking the question-why must I learn this?-in a moral sense. Often, the student is not asking about the moral value of what they are

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1 I will not be making any distinction between "moral" and "ethical" here and below.

learning: for example, how does what I am learning make me a better person? Or how does this make me a better citizen? How is what I am learning help me understand the meaning of life, or the purpose of my life? There are rare students who ask this moral question, and it is of course difficult to determine how a teacher might answer such a moral question.

Plato has an interesting view of the purpose of education that may help us think about the student's question in a helpful way. Plato observes that humans are the only kind of creatures, amongst all the other animals, that are able to reason, and with their reason, ask: How should one live? What is the best way for a human being to live their life? This is obviously a normative question, and any kind of answer to this question must employ arguments.

But interestingly, Plato begins with what is perhaps a strange argument. His argument, very briefly, might be summed up as follows. Simply because humans have the capacity to think, and with their powers of thinking they are able to ask themselves-how should one live?-it is fundamental (and non-accidental) to a human life to ask: How should one live?

Plato then says that with our powers to think we are able to think about what is truly good for our life: and therefore it is good for a human life to think about what is truly good for a human life.

Perhaps this is beginning to sound circular, but Plato's idea is actually quite simple and stunning. We can already provide part of an answer to the question, How should one live? by saying: a good human life is a life in which one asks, How should one live? What is a good life? Asking that question is constitutive of living a good human life (Bernard Williams, 1985).

If we are to live a life asking, What is a good life? Plato thinks that we must come to love learning in general, because a love of learning is, on the one hand, a love of one's capacity to think, and, on the other hand, it is a love of knowledge of reality. One loves to learn because one loves to exercise one's power to think. It is this very power to think that enables one to ask about what is truly good for a human life, and plays a fundamental role in living a good life.

Secondly, a love of learning in general, is, for Plato, a moral excellence, a moral achievement. According to Plato, we naturally desire what is truly good (*Republic* 505d-e), for we intuit that what is truly good will make our lives happy and fulfilling and meaningful. When we recognize that a love of learning will persistently motivate us to pursue knowledge of reality, we will, in Plato's thinking, also realize that a love of learning is essential for moral growth, because the moral life is a life of investigation, as

I described above. Investigating what is truly good is characteristic of a moral life. Thus, because a love of learning is connected with discovering truth and trying to discover what makes a human life truly good, a love of learning is, for Plato, the foundation of a moral life.

6. To return to the student's question, Plato's philosophy of education can be put this way: teachers can find ways to teach their students to ask the question-why must I learn this?-in a moral sense. The student will do well to learn to ask: How is what I am learning good human life? And by all means: How is what I am learning good for me now? The student or the teacher may have a difficult time answering this ethical question, but the idea is that the question would be the start of the student's own ethical investigation, and, therefore, the start of their ethical life (see section 6 above). For Plato, it is a moral accomplishment, not so much a practical one, for a student to be able to say: I may not see how what I am learning helps me discover how to live a good human life, but I love learning and I am sure that learning-exercising my power to think and reason-is part of living a good human life now, and it will help me understand myself and others better. Dewey and Rousseau are right: the student will be much more inclined to learn something if they find it practically useful to their lives now. But we are not simply practical beings; we are moral beings who are capable of thinking about what is truly good.

### References

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## 「なぜ、学習しなければならないのか？」 への二種類の回答

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### 要 約

教育哲学研究はどのような役割を果たすべきなのであろうか。筆者は、教育問題への実証的な回答よりもむしろ、規範的な回答を探求するのが教育哲学の果たすべき役割であるという立場をとる。実証的な研究では、たとえば、「世界の小学校では、どのような教科が教えられているのか」といった問題への回答が、規範的な研究では、「小学校では、どのような教科が教えられるべきなのか」という問題への回答が探求されることになる。

本論文で筆者は、教員が、生徒や学生からしばしば突きつけられる問い——「私はなぜ、～を学習しなければならないのですか」——に規範的な回答をおこなうための基本的な論点を示したいと思う。

「私はなぜ、～を学習しなければならないのですか」という問いには、実際には、ふたつの意味が含まれている。すなわち、実際的な意味と道徳的な意味である。どちらの意味にとるかで、それぞれの教育哲学が要請されることになる。

実際的な意味にとると、この問いは、「～を学習することが、自分にとってなんの役に立つのか」ということである。生徒や学生は、高等数学、世界史といった、現在の自分の生活や関心には何ら関係ないことを学習しなければならない場合に、このような問いを發するものである。ルソー、デューイに従うならば、この際に教員は、「将来の…のために役に立つ」という回答はしてはいけないのである。換言すれば、授業において、生徒や学生の現在の生活や関心に有用であるような学習経験を保証しなければならないことになる。

「私はなぜ、～を学習しなければならないのですか」という問いかけが、道徳的な意味でなされた場合、それは、「～を学習することは、自分が、より人生のために、どのような意味があるのか」ということである。この問いへの回答には、プラトンの哲学が手がかりをあたえてくれよう。

プラトンによれば、人間は理性を行使する、すなわち、考えることができる唯一の生物である。人間は、この理性の行使をつうじて、ついには、自分自身に問いかける



——自分はどのように生きるべきか——ようになる。「どのように生きるべきか」とは、  
たんに生きるだけではなく、ほんとうに善く生きることを意味する。探求の人生——  
つねに、「何が、ほんとうに善く生きることなのか」を問い続ける人生——のために  
は学習が必要であり、ここに、学習は、道徳的な意味を持つことになる。プラトン哲  
学を信奉する教師は、生徒や学生が、つねに問い続けることを勧めることになる。