

## *Book Review / Recension d'ouvrage*

### **Foundations of Education: A Social, Political, and Philosophical Approach**

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#### **Reviewed by / Revu par**

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An alluring aspect for many students who take foundations of education is its focus on life's big questions. This is clearly a concern for Jason C. Robinson in his new book, *Foundations of Education: A Social, Political, and Philosophical Approach*, a succinct foray through central philosophies of education that facilitates a deep exploration of key questions in the field. What is the fundamental source of knowledge? What is the basic nature of humanity? Should children be taught according to their nature, or according to an ideally envisioned society? Who should be privy to a quality education? What and how should students be taught? Such questions implicate teachers throughout our careers, and are but a sample of those that Robinson addresses throughout this reader.

*Foundations of Education* takes the reader on a journey through the works of five influential philosophers—Plato (noting the widely accepted belief that he wrote on behalf of Socrates), Aristotle, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Dewey—summarizing each philosopher's implications for education. Each theorist offers an archetypal perspective on the basic nature of humanity, on the individual in/and society, and on the subsequent role for education. They all write from within different generations and nations (with the latter exception being Plato and Aristotle), and the chronological presentation underlies the presupposition (which is sometimes made explicit) that each benefited

from the work of his precursors. The outcome is that the reader is presented with a breadth of compelling and sometimes controversial cases on what education is, was, and might be.

The philosophers' responses to each foundational question are surprisingly varied, ultimately forming a labyrinth of perspectives for what constitutes education. Plato's ethical rationalism, Aristotle's metaphysics, Locke's empiricism, Rousseau's (pre-) romanticism, and Dewey's pragmatism all serve as ideal types upon which corresponding views for education are implicated. Take, for example, perspectives on the source of knowledge: While Plato suggests that knowledge emanates through reason, abstraction, and principles, Aristotle proposes sensing, observation, and description, Locke, through our ideas of the world, Rousseau, through feelings and emotions, and Dewey through problem-solving, social interactions, and experience. These epistemological positions have enormous consequences for other aspects of the foundations of education. On curricular choices: While Dewey emphasizes science (biology in particular), mathematics, arts, and social studies, Locke has little use for art and science, and highlights instead the importance of reading, memory-work, writing and language. (One might also contrast these conclusions with Aristotle's recommendations for reading, writing, gymnastics, drawing, and music.) On who should be educated: Plato's proposition of extracting for schooling only a handful of "philosopher kings" was broadened by Aristotle's suggestion to educate all (five years and older, and except for women and slaves), but Dewey's progressive and experiential approaches were targeted towards all students. Locke and Rousseau's ideal that mainstream education should be structured around partnerships between tutors and parents for individual children seems particularly radical in light of mass public education that we know today.

Indeed, a great strength of this book is how it forces the reader to consider the binaries that implicate education. Should education be for the individual or for society? Whether we view child development as one connected to nature or nurture? If life outcomes are mostly as a result of individual agency or social structures? Whether we teach with a focus on the mind (ideas) or on matter (reality, body, world)? These are central questions in a foundation for education, answering the guiding question, what do we teach?

Curiously, the book concludes with Dewey's philosophy of education instead of continuing to analyze, summarize, or synthesize the work of the five philosophers. To be

fair, Robinson regularly embeds points of similarity and contrast between the philosophers' perspectives within each chapter, drawing particular references to the works of the scholar in the preceding chapter, however an overall synthesis of the book seems lacking. On one hand this comes across as a glaring omission, leaving the book incomplete, as if a time or word length deadline was abruptly met. But on the other hand, this gap allows for ample comparative analyses on the part of its readers. For example, one exercise to which the book lends itself is for education students to choose an educational question that particularly compels them, to surmise each of the five philosophers' positions on their question, and then to use these responses as a platform to present their own philosophy of education.

A compelling feature of this book is its unique format, with a large degree of symmetry between chapters. Each chapter includes text boxes that summarize key ideas of each philosopher; figures and diagrams (i.e. Plato's metaphysics and epistemology); boxes with "Consider" questions to stimulate one's imagination; brief yet fascinating biographies of each philosopher (that Rousseau's philosophy of education developed largely from his personal experiences on the fringes of society is quite telling); and discussion questions at the end of each chapter. Adding to the legitimacy of the book are carefully selected citations of original texts such as *Metaphysics* (Aristotle), *Essays Concerning Human Understanding* (Locke), *The Social Contract* (Rousseau), and *Democracy and Education* (Dewey). The clear anomaly is the introductory chapter that provides a useful overview of the nature of philosophy, education, and humanity (including approaches, categories, and features), and that firmly prepares the reader for their philosophical journey. Given that a foundations of education curriculum typically addresses historical, sociological, and philosophical perspectives of education (and often incorporates aspects of law, governance, educational psychology, assessment, and classroom management), despite its subtitle, *Foundations of Education* primarily adopts a philosophical perspective to address foundational issues in education.

All books must be purposeful in their scope, content, and omissions, and due to its relative brevity, this text is exceptionally deliberate in its choices, tone, and underpinning theories. This has both its costs and benefits. Upon preliminary inspection it is clear that the five philosophers selected to base a foundation for education are all Western, all male, and all writing from dominant social, cultural, and linguistic (Greek, French and English) standpoints. Clearly lacking are perspectives of alternative, indigenous, non-Western, and

non-dominant education scholars. This is one reason why I would see this text used in combination with others in order to broaden the voices from which future teachers construct their foundation educational philosophy. With that said, one can also see the basis for the selection of these five philosophers, as their perspectives are incredibly broad considering the relative homogeneity, and their work has had an undeniable influence on the history of Western society and education.

Indeed, Jason C. Robinson's *Foundations of Education* is a succinct, accessible, and profound text that deals squarely with the most fundamental issues in education. The views of the five philosophers that Robinson has selected for this book are presented in a gripping way and given the legitimacy associated with each—and despite (or because of) their historical context—they immerse the reader in a thought experiment tracking the enormous range of possibilities for education beyond what we know today. This is a particularly useful exercise given the difficulty for many education students (not to mention teachers and other actors in education) to fully appreciate how the institution of education, and its degree of standardization of aspects such as grade levels, class sizes, subject matter, and even the design of the school itself, has been constructed. *Foundations of Education* provides an opportunity for students of education to deeply immerse themselves in these ideas.