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Educational Research and the Philosophic Disposition

JAMES WM. NOLL

IT IS proper to say that "You can't do anything with philosophy." There is, however, an immediate rejoinder which imposes itself, and that is "Granted we cannot do anything with philosophy, might not philosophy, if we concern ourselves with it, do something with us?" [1] The place of philosophy in the contemporary world, the meaning of the phrase "philosophic research," the interaction of philosophy and empirical science, the effect of scientific research upon philosophy—all of these matters are open to interpretation, and this is but a brief attempt at such interpretation.

Views of the role of philosophy which have had more than momentary prevalence include the following:

1. Philosophy as a world-view, an all-embracive explainer, or a general system of explanation
2. Philosophy as the region of inquiry which lies (or better, drifts) between religious dogma and scientific fact
3. Philosophy as the explainer only of the unknown which, necessarily, is constantly relinquishing its domain to the sciences
4. Philosophy as a view of human nature and the human condition, the study of the present conception of human existence
5. Philosophy as the operational interpreter of meaning, of knowledge.

The latter two of these views, in the opinion of the present writer, are in ascendency. They are not mutually exclusive depictions but do reflect two generally opposing approaches to philosophy: existentialism and logical analysis (each of which views receive variable labels by their exponents).

The logical analysts seem to hold to the position that scientific knowledge is coextensive with all knowledge, that what has passed for philosophy or "philosophic research" in the past (and among the contemporary existentialists) is nonsense since it deals with unanswerable questions and is hampered by emotive irrelevancies. The view from the other side feels that insistence upon such exclusions as the analysts demand in order to add further pragmatic purity to their endeavors may, instead, turn their philosophy into mere technical

[1] Martin Heidegger. *Introduction to Metaphysics*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959. p. 10.

manipulation. The existentialists hold to a "fuller" view of philosophy's role, a view which they feel has a potentiality for a far more sweeping influence than the "word games" played by the analysts.

Although these two approaches are basically at odds in their definitions of philosophy, their contentiousness cannot negate the contributions of their "spirit" to the more complete understanding of the process of education and the significance and depth of research activities in education.

The analytic philosophers search for meaning through "specifics" and thereby strike a kinship with scientists. Although they propound no formal theory of education, their efforts toward conceptual clarity exert (or at least *can* exert) a positive influence upon behavioral research into the varied aspects of the educative process. On a more comprehensive level, new ways of looking at the organization of disciplines, couched in meaningful terminology, can give rise to behavioral research in the area of learning theory and the consequent development and testing of specific methodologies and techniques designed to verify the theoretical position. The "analytic disposition," then, can aid the researcher in the development of conceptual models and can lend an element of linguistic-semantic control to his investigations.

The existentialist philosophers search for meaning through "generals" and thereby ensure a linkage between the concrete operations of the researcher, the theoretical framework within which he is working, and the totality of human nature as "being-in-the-world." What is provided by the "existentialist disposition" is a broad conception of the relationships between the subject of the research and the researcher as subject himself, which lends meaningfulness and tissue to the particular endeavor at hand. Thus existentialist speculation regarding the human situation as a whole can, for example, provide the basis of a theoretical position for psychotherapeutic methodologies and techniques, the verified procedures of which can be adapted to counseling situations as a part of the total educational enterprise and may further have applications in general classroom practice.

Creative and Practical

To some, the very word "philosophy" has an air of stagnancy, and among those who feel so one might find a large number of "action researchers." But the adjective "stagnant" is a difficult one to apply to a human endeavor which has never been a defender of any status quo and which has always been searching after better and deeper levels of meaning, especially after that most general meaning which serves as a context for all particular meanings and configurations of meanings. The philosopher, as William James characterized him, sees the familiar as if it were strange, and the strange as if it were familiar. He can take things up and lay them down again. The philosophic mind is full of air that plays around every subject. It rouses us from our dogmatic slumber and breaks up our caked prejudices.[2] Philosophy cannot be stagnant or useless; it must be creative and practical.

Philosophy, for Dewey, is the attempt

[2] William James. *Some Problems of Philosophy*. New York: Longmans, Green & Company, 1911. p. 5 ff.

to comprehend, "to gather together the varied details of the world and of life into a single inclusive whole, which shall either be a unity, or . . . shall reduce the plural details to a small number of ultimate principles."

Dewey believed that it was the role of science (and here we would include not only the behavioral researchers of the present scene but also the logical analysts) to say what generalizations are tenable and what they specifically are. But, Dewey contended, when we ask what sort of permanent disposition of action toward the world the scientific disclosures exact of us we are raising a philosophic question. From this point of view, "totality" can never refer merely to quantitative summation; it must rather signify continuity.[3] The philosopher, or, if you will, the researcher with a philosophic disposition, must, by definition, seek not only knowledge, but, more importantly, wisdom. He must seek not only new conceptions and clarifications, but must hold himself responsible for seeking out authentic relationships between his findings and a speculative world-view.

Whether one sees the role of philosophy as that of analyzing particulars or that of thinking in terms of generalities, the researcher with a philosophic disposition utilizes methods and engages in activities which are formal, which are normative, and which are synoptic. He perceives, he observes, he differentiates, he analyzes, he classifies, he traces analogies and causal relationships, he hypothesizes, he verifies, he evaluates, he synthesizes. Philosophy, viewed in this light, cannot be contrasted with the sciences; philosophic research is not something completely alien to behavioral research.

Philosophy, as an attitude, insists upon the forming of a theoretical or conceptual framework, speculative though it may be, for specific research endeavors. It must, on the other hand, remain open to and responsive to the findings and insights of specific research, tentative though these may be. In this context of mutual support and constant interaction the meaningfulness and integrity of each pursuit is preserved and enhanced.

If researchers working from an analytic posture refuse to enter the regions of speculation and generality, they suffer a loss of continuity and significance. If researchers working from an existentialist orientation refuse to listen to the insights of scientists, anthropologists, sociologists, etc., they stand a good chance of becoming as outmoded and irrelevant as the edifices built by classical idealism and classical realism.

There appears to be little worth in attempting to extract from a given philosophic system frameworks and models for specific educational research. In this sense, philosophy can do nothing for us. On the other hand, a philosophic disposition, regardless of the system or orientation which prompts it, is necessary if educational research is to lead not only to increased knowledge but to increased wisdom. Philosophy is not "handy," nor does it make things easier; it only makes them more difficult—and more meaningful.

—JAMES WM. NOLL, *Assistant Professor of Education, University of Maryland, College Park.*

[3] John Dewey. *Democracy and Education.* New York: Macmillan, 1916. p. 379-80.

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