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# What Is the Educational Problem?

Laurance Labadie

1958

At the beginning of Ralph Borsodi's "Education and Living," he criticizes John Dewey for saying that the role of education is to train the child for the society in which he lives; and he (Borsodi) maintains that, *no*, the aim of education should be to fit the pupil for a "normal" (or sane) society. Good point, but let's not overlook that Dewey has a point too.<sup>1</sup> For we do not yet have a normal or sane society, nor do we know precisely what it is. But are not both of these men doctrinaires who differ only on the *content* of what is to be indoctrinated?

Borsodi says that the teachers should be the real leaders in society. Plato believed that philosophers should be the rulers. Are not both of these views authoritarian and inimical to liberty? *Which* philosophies, and *which* teachers?

Borsodi believes there should be a change from mis-education to "right" education. But who is to decide what is "right" education?

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<sup>1</sup> These men are not exactly speaking of the same thing: Dewey is referring mostly to technology, while Borsodi is concerned with *mores*.

Since what is obviously required is a *method* or process of ascertaining “right,” those who prescribe *content* before discovering a *method* have got the cart before the horse.

I question whether the process of decision-making should proceed from the top down, from some authority, even teachers. I think it should be a transverse operation, working through competition, whereby a choice may be made between a number of *different* implemented opinions about *how* and *what* to teach. The making of decisions regarding choice of education should be the prerogative of all concerned—parents, pupils, and others, as well as teachers—otherwise we shall have established an authoritarian *monopoly of decision* of how the world shall be. Is this what Borsodi wants?

We learn and decide according to fruit, and fruit is the *end* of a *process*, not something that can be determined at the beginning, because while we may hope for a given result we cannot be assured what the result will be merely because we hoped for it by using a given procedure or set of norms. The condition of the world today is largely the result of the education of the schools, with the rather apparent conclusion that something is radically wrong with education. What can the error be? My contention is that it is because of the authoritarianism of both the State and educators in the educational process.

Most of our educators are doctrinaires; they differ merely on what is to be indoctrinated. Few have the remotest conception that the crux of the question consists in a *method* of effecting decisions rather than content. None are libertarians; much less can they believe that liberty in education is possible or would work. Here is the tragedy of superstition and conceit and pusillanimity. As a matter of historical fact, educators with rare exception have been apologists and rationalizers and adaptors to the particular status quo in which they lived and operated. (Borsodi is right in criticizing Dewey on this score.) And it is a notorious fact that relatively few of the greatest minds were the products of the schools.

It seems to me that Ralph Borsodi, in the process of disintegrating and separating factors of the social problem, for the purpose of analysis, which is the right and proper way of getting a clear perception of the elements of a problem, has forgotten or failed to do the reverse, namely to synthesize or put together these elements and observe how the “mechanism” works in toto. The result is that he is left with these *fragmentalized* and *compartmentalized* elements, which he styles the “major problems of living,” apparently unaware that none of them operate independently, but in reality react upon and affect each other in a most complex manner. Real life is an interacting compendium of all his “problems,” and to “solve” any one of them as if they were independent of and disconnected from all the rest seems to me exceedingly unrealistic.

Further, if, as it seems to me, Ralph Borsodi does not have a synthetic or integrative principle, one that is also *dynamic*, he does not really have a philosophy—has no way to integrate his fragmented fourteen “problems”—and necessarily his idea about a change from miseducation to “right” education merely implies a change in the symptoms of the authoritarian educational methods which have come down through the ages. In such case the educational question is: What kind of stuff shall we instill into the heads of these youngsters? In this frame of reference what they have managed to do, mostly, (begging my pardon) was to educate youth on how to be stupid! Really, doesn’t the condition of the world seem to bear up this contention?

It can hardly be fairly objected that Borsodi’s concept of “normal living” is an integrative concept. It is a mere norm, an arbitrary standard; and *there is nothing dynamic about it*. *Liberty*, on the other hand, is a *dynamic method*, not only by which adequate norms may be ascertained, but also furnishes the *process* by which progressive betterment may be assured. It is one thing to proclaim *what* should be taught; it is quite another to maintain that the method of determining *what* is by complete freedom of all opinions to operate.

Freedom in education implies the freedom to establish schools, and the freedom to choose which schools to attend. The field of education becomes a universal experimental ground, so to speak, *mutable* and changing as opposed to *static* institutionalism. There will be no “leaders,” except in the sense that anyone who proposes something new and feasible is a leader. Such freedom is necessarily a component of a free and competitive society, allowing variety from or by which *only* may *comparative values* be made, thus assuring merit.

Authoritarianism in education, which means monopolistic control of making decisions in the scholastic field, not only eliminates the salubrious features of freedom, but by allowing the State and its paid hirelings to be the sole arbiters in matters educational makes decline in quality inevitable. The truth of this may perhaps be understood better if we think of schools under Mussolini, Hitler, or the Russian system; but the system in this country is precisely the same. And the end product is what Borsodi calls “this ugly civilization.” Certainly, but what may one expect? Yet Borsodi merely believes that the wrong stuff has been taught; he (as well as everyone else apparently) utterly fails to realize that the fault lies in authoritarianism itself

There is now considerable concern about the efficacy of American schools as compared with Russia. Note that this alarm is evoked from a *comparison*—in an authoritarian system there is no opportunity for comparison (a thing cannot be compared with itself), therefore the degenerated condition of American education was heretofore oblivious. But a grievous error is in the making. The Russian system is *not* superior to ours. Both systems are the *same*. Yet in the unthinking and stupid bluster here, more money will be appropriated, more power granted to the dispensers of the extorted loot, and more arbitrary decision-making power placed into the hands of so-called educators—all to no avail because the same deleterious factors which brought education to its present sorry pass will not only be maintained but accentuated. Thus we

merrily continue on the road to Statist perdition—while blithely condemning the similar absolutism in Russia!

Ralph Borsodi is only too right in indicating the vital importance of education. But this is only *one* of the important factors in the general battle between liberty and authority in *all* fields of living, especially economics. At the moment, liberty is being crucified by the insane gyrations of politicians and people alike—and as I have indicated, by so-called educators. It is high time that people of intelligence and integrity call a halt to this insane parade toward catastrophe. And I call upon the School of Living to discard its piecemeal approach to the “problems” of society and to realize that the actual solution to all of these problems hinges upon an integrated and dynamic principle having at its core the *liberty of the individual*.

The “educational problem” does not consist in proposing a new set of “truths” to be inculcated, but, as with all other “problems,” consists in a free field for the competitive operation of voluntarily organized educational efforts. To believe that the better educational methods will not prevail is to say there is no hope in relying on the intelligence of mankind. In which case the indoctrination of what someone considers “right” education will be of no avail either.

To base the well-being of individuals on the proposition that the well-being of some fictitious entity styled “society” requires “protectors” leaves conspicuously standing the annoying question: Who is to protect us from our protectors? One may similarly ask who is to protect us from our present “educators.”

Some other time we may investigate the proposition that Liberty is the greatest integrative principle known, by which the inherent *contradictions* which exist within and between all principles may be *reconciled*, to the end that there shall be a continual and continuing tendency toward *equilibrium* in society.