BEGINNING AT THE BEGINNING: WHY PHILOSOPHY CAN'T WAIT

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine, and acts upon them
may be compared to a wise man who built his house upon the rock.
And the rain descended, and the floods came,
and the winds blew and burst against that house;
and yet, it did not fall, for it had been founded upon the rock.

And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act upon them
will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand.
And the rain descended, and the floods came,
and the winds blew and burst against that house;
and it fell and great was its fall.

Matthew 7:24-27

It is risky business, in a time of continued debate on school-church relations, to deploy a religious parable as an analogy for educational reform. Nevertheless, this parable is the one to which I keep returning as I try to articulate my dismay concerning the contemporary clarion calls for school reform.

These modern reformers - like their earlier counterparts from Horace Mann to Hyman Rickover - play a role analogous to that of a housing inspector. With considerable skill and precision, they examine the pedagogical plumbing and wiring, measure the energy efficiency of the unit, note cracks in the walls, and identify potential hazards to the occupants. The most talented ones also are able to locate hidden structural weaknesses requiring repairs more significant than repaneling a room or installing a more modern system of climate control.

In education, the inspectors are quickly followed by the equivalent of the housing industry's architects, contractors and interior designers. Successive cycles of these "change agents" have modeled (and remodeled) houses of learning upon a highly eclectic set of curricular, instructional and organizational blueprints. By looking carefully, we can readily identify where our public schools have incorporated elements of the Colonial, Greek Revival, Industrial, and High Tech models, as well as where they have abandoned strict functionalism in order to go Baroque.

All of this inspecting and refurbishing - all of this professional and political action - created an aura of impending significance and heightened expectations. And yet, the reforms actually implemented rarely live up to the claims of their proponents and soon become the problems to be redressed by further changes.

Will the story be the same as the currently popular school reform proposals are implemented across the country? My suspicion, based upon more than a decade of studying, participating in, and evaluating educational reforms is that today's "innovations" - from merit pay and career ladder plans to the more recent requirements in the State of Texas that prospective teachers be prepared in the disciplines they will teach rather than in the methods of teaching them - will neither solve the problems besetting our public schools, no adequately tap the enormous potential inherent in our educational institutions. Rather, it seems almost inevitable that when

the next round of rain descends and the floods come again and the winds blow and burst once more upon our houses of learning, these reforms (and the section of the house to which they're attached) will fall...and great will be their fall.

In order to move beyond this cycle, I argue that we must stop focusing exclusively on the house itself and pay more attention to the foundation upon which it rests, i.e., begin at the beginning. More specifically, the need is to determine whether the activities provided by our schools are built upon the sand, and, if so, what can be done to place a more solid foundation underneath them.

It should be noted that I am not referring to the social, legal, political, or economic foundations of education, but rather to a stratum underlying even these cornerstones of our educational system. My concern is with the bedrock of all we seek and all we hope to accomplish through the schools. This paper attempts to address the status and promise of education by assigning a philosophical function to it which has its roots in the public life of Greek civilization - producing a good person.

The Greek notion of the proper function of education may be expressed through the development of habitual right conduct. It was an idea of virtue or excellence in conduct expressed through the Greek word *arete.* The word expresses potency, competency, the ability to be - *effectively to be* - a certain way. For Aristotle, habitual right conduct was as much a social ideal as a private one. It denoted the power to work out solutions to private and public problems. The idea behind habitual right conduct was as closely associated with beauty as it was with morality. Life, after all, was not just living, but living well. What living well meant always included the idea of public as well as private life, and the exposition of it was found not only in philosophy, but in art, music, literature, drama, and politics. Thomas Green is quoted as employing what could be taken as a description of the Greek concept of right conduct:

> *Being a good person includes being able to secure in the world such goods as friendship, security, sustenance, and the worldly conditions and personal dispositions of civility, insofar as such goods can be secured against the vagaries of luck and fate.*
> *Being a good person...is knowing how to conduct oneself; how to use time, things, talents, and other resources; how to distinguish when things need doing; how to control oneself and when. This doing things well and doing good things well, is an important part of our moral <social> conscience.(1)*

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT AND PHILOSOPHICAL LEARNING

The relationship between habitual right conduct and the good person is here approached through that which is unique to the individual: *character.*

Thinking about the conjunction of "character" and "philosophy in education" brings to mind the beginning of the Greek work which deals most directly with the relation of human excellence to learning: Plato's dialogue "Meno". Meno, we recall, abruptly accosts Socrates in Athens with a demand: "Can you tell me, Socrates - is virtue something that can be taught? Or does it come by practice? Or is it neither teaching nor practice that gives it to a man but natural aptitude or something else?"(2) Socrates answers to this effect: "How can I tell whether it can be taught or not when, to begin with, I don't even know what it is?"

I draw from that opening, *mutatis mutandis*, the warning first to fix my terms when attempting to speak about the development of character in the good person and its relation to philosophy in education. I shall, therefore, begin by defining character, and in such a way that it becomes eminently a matter of teaching. Then I shall go on to an understanding of philosophy in education as quite distinct from character development - indeed, it may sometimes disintegrate character. But, of course, I shall nonetheless try to save the day for philosophy in education.

Let me start with a revealing extreme. We say that someone *is* a character, colloquially a "card". We mean that the person displays with abandon characteristics amounting to comic caricature.

Besides "being a character", people are said to *have* a character, and that in two senses:

1) In the sense of bearing a conformation, a shape, upon themselves; and,
2) In the sense of having that form or mark publicly acknowledged, in bearing a reputation.

Both of these ways of speaking preserve something of the original sense of the Greek word *charakter*. It signified the mark cut in by an engraving instrument. It means a scratched, engraved, stamped or identifying mark, as on a coin or a seal. Therefore, it requires an underlying substance, a human material, a *nature* upon which it is impressed. People "without character" are by no means without a nature; rather, their nature comes out in a rather bizarre fashion, without reliably gaugeable determination, like unminted metal.

The notion of character is, then, in its very origin figurative, since it relies on the metaphor of an underlying substance disciplined by an impressed shape. This figurative model now makes the idea of character development pedagogically plausible. For one thing, it offers a resolution to the old debate of *nature versus nurture.* These *two* inseparable aspects of human shaping appear to me to be *antithetical* only when we view *humanity remotely* so that it looks either as if it were *helplessly* what it was born to be or *hopelessly* what it was made to be. But, anyone who has ever been admitted to intimate knowledge of another person knows that the effort to discern the interplay of original nature and acquired character is one of the most rewarding preoccupations of love and friendship. In short, the bald opposition of nature and nurture may be false but the terms themselves are right enough.

What I mean to argue is that there seems to be, in every human being, that which is practically congenital, aboriginal, and also something else which is imposed on the first nature as a second nature; a stamp, a mark, in short, a character.

However vivid one's image of original human nature may be, it cannot come to appearance at all except under the imprint of character - it is through character that nature manifests itself, and, without its shaping, what emerges is excessive or amorphous, weak and wild. Character is what appears, and first nature is discerned through it; what shows to the world is what the world has circumstantially shaped.

It is the planned and deliberate shaping that the world administers to us that I shall now particularly mean by character. Let me specify more. Character is a *moral* shape, not a mere pattern of behavior into which we are driven against our will. It shows in conduct, not merely in behavior; in willed action, not in driven reaction.

Now, human action is distinguished by having purpose before it and principle underlying it. Therefore, it is governed by articulated thought, by propositions. I

argue that the development of a character acting with good purposes before it and well-reasoned principles (i.e., convictions) underlying it is best achieved within the context of philosophy. Therefore, reverting to Socrates' injunction, let me articulate precisely what I understand by philosophical learning.

Philosophical learning comprises those activities in the learning environment which utilize methods of reflective, critical, and/or analytical thought for learners to obtain proficiency in dealing with problems or issues involving questions about the meaning, truth, and logical connections of fundamental ideas which resist empirical solutions.(3) Thus, philosophical learning is viewed from two complementary aspects:

1) As study matter with a distinctive purpose and addressing distinctive questions and problems; and,
2) As method with its own procedures for achieving that purpose and addressing those problems and questions.

The fundamental metaphysical, epistemological, and axiological ideas which comprise the study matter of philosophical learning and the methods of reflective, critical, and analytical thought are viewed as overlapping aspects of the total philosophical enterprise. One *does* philosophy as well as *studies* it. The best approach in *studying* it is to *do* it. As with our earlier discussion of nature-nurture, however distinct these aspects may be, they cannot in philosophy be separated; thus a philosopher, invited to affirm or deny a given metaphysical, epistemological, or axiological idea retains the right to say, "I cannot tell whether I think this idea is true or false or what its logical connections are until I understand what it means." This is how traditional philosophy has always replied to invitations of this kind. Therefore, analytical philosophers must continue to concern themselves with what the subject matter of various modes of discourse is and what it is like; what basic kinds of structures there are - and about what the world is like; whether, and if so how, it is possible for us to mean what we seem to mean and to know what we seem to know; etc.(4)

By analyzing the meaning and form of language in light of views or assumptions about the semantic and knowledge-yielding powers of the human mind and by critically and/or reflectively examining what it makes sense to say and what it does not make sense to say about a fundamental idea, philosophers attempt to answer philosophical questions with warranted assertiveness about knowledge, reality, or value. Thus, the analytical, critical, and reflective methods are sound and the traditional metaphysical, epistem ological, and axiological questions remain.

John Dewey also viewed philosophy in ways which imply a certain totality, generality, and ultimateness of both study matter and method. With respect to study matter, he saw philosophy as "an attempt to comprehend - that is to gather together the varied details of the world and of life into a single inclusive whole, which shall either be a unity, or, as in the dualistic systems, shall reduce the plural details to a small number of ultimate principles."(5) This "gathering together the varied details of the world" leads, according to Dewey, to "the endeavor to attain as unified, consistent, and complete an outlook upon existence as is possible."(6) The "outlook upon experience" aspect is expressed in philosophy as a "love of wisdom." Dewey believed that, whenever philosophy has been taken seriously, it has always been assumed that it signified achieving a wisdom which would influence the conduct of life. The

philosophic outlook is toward the general and ultimate. Dewey connected the generality and ultimateness of philosophy to the "disposition to penetrate to deeper levels of meaning - to go below the surface and find out the connections of any event or object, and to keep at it."(7)

Dewey also felt it to be of assistance to connect philosophy with reflective and critical thinking in its distinction from grounded knowledge. Grounded knowledge, Dewey held, was science; "it represents objects which have been settled, ordered, disposed of rationally."(8) Reflective thought, on the other hand, is brought on by an unsettled situation which it aims to overcome. Philosophy, Dewey went on, "is thinking what the known demands of us - what responsive attitude it exacts."(9) It provides ideas of what is possible, not records of what is fact. "Its value lies not in furnishing solutions...but in defining difficulties and suggesting methods for dealing with them."(10)

Dewey explained the unique domain of problems addressed by philosophy through the aforementioned distinction between philosophy and science. Dewey would agree, however, that philosophy has had, and will undoubtedly continue to have, an important protoscientific function. Inasmuch as each science works on a restricted range of problems, philosophy is needed to synthesize their individual conclusions into a comprehensive world view. But, an educational system that stresses the difference between science and philosophy (or, more generally, liberal studies) has served us poorly. The view that the facts derived from science and the values derived from philosophy could not be separated was recognized by Aristotle in his distinction of intellectual and moral virtues. For Aristotle, it was not enough to establish habits of right conduct - intellectual grounds for such habits were also to be established by each individual. Fact and value were thus brought close together.

That one feature which has characterized liberal and philosophical learning from its very beginning is generally, and sometimes apologetically, that which distinguishes it still - what some would call its "uselessness". In speaking of the education of the young, indeed, in defining it for the Western world, Aristotle says, in his Politics that, though useful arts are indispensable, the young should not be taught so many mechanical skills as to make them narrow, but they should be educated in the free and liberal arts; clearly, education is liberal and philosophical essentially in contrast with vocational training. The liberality of philosophical learning in Aristotle's time and now is its freedom from the constraints of application. As our discussion of Dewey's perspective suggests, it can take a large and long perspective. Dewey's main point was that philosophical pursuits are more comprehensive and fundamental than scientific ones. Dewey's notion of developing the "disposition to penetrate to deeper levels of meaning - to go below the surface and seek connections of events or objects, and to keep at it," has been taken to mean the willingness and courage to question fundamental assumptions.

However, an education grounded in such a foundation appears to have a most dubious and problematic relation to character development.

To begin with, in order to profit from such learning, a student must bring to it a character already formed. It would appear to be extremely difficult for students to assimilate readings critically, to test their fundamental ideas in engaged dialogue, to address a complex problem, if they do not have well-developed principles to pit against the new influences.

It follows that philosophical learning understood as a critical, reflective, and analytical interlude is more apt to test, and perhaps disintegrate, character than to develop it. Sometimes the harm is serious and lasting; students may begin to lose their internal - and external - contour as their familiar faith and trust comes unravelled. For an educational environment to generate perplexities in the minds of the students without providing training in responsible ways of addressing them can be destructive. It may displace traditions in the lives of young people and leave them only half-educated, without any coherent perspective on self and world. Like animals thrust back into the wild with their instincts disturbed by domestication, they are left with neither guidelines nor a responsible way of proceeding. In some ways, those blindly secure in the grips of tradition, the cultural counterpart of instinct, may be more fortunate than those liberated from tradition, but with no rational substitute.

Why not, then, settle for scientific, technical, or vocational training within the framework of traditional wisdom on fundamental ideas? There are many who advise this. Knowledge has been seen as portending great evil ever since its first appearance in the garden of Eden and philosophical knowledge has been similarly viewed ever since it was introduced into the community of Western tradition by the Greeks. We must not forget the fate of those with the courage to dare question the fundamental assumptions of their age; Socrates, Christ, Ghandi, King, to name only a few. But awareness and reflectiveness once introduced cannot be contained. Problems encountered will lead inexorably to their source. In many cases, this will be in the fundamental assumptions and presuppositions that shape and influence our way of looking at and thinking about things. Traditions even on fundamental matters have their own problems and often need criticism and reconstruction. Narrow, restricted, and conflicting traditional beliefs and attitudes on fundamental matters impair our perspective and influence our character and, thus, our activities at all cultural levels. Education has the responsibility not only to preserve and to transmit the culture, but to criticize, correct, and advance it. This involves the development of a critical and reflective understanding of the culture and the capacity to appropriate and to use it intelligently. The measure of one's provincialism and cultural slavery is the extent to which one is blindly in the grips of one's culture without critical understanding and mastery of it. The measure of one's education is the extent to which one has a critical understanding and mastery of human culture and can use it intelligently in one's efforts to organize one's life and to know, to relate to, and to cope with reality.

What, then, is the fundamental function of philosophy in education? What does it contribute with respect to human formation? I argue that it is threefold:

1) To help elevate the level of awareness and appreciation among students of the philosophical problems in our culture - the conflicts and contradictions in our ways of looking at and thinking about things that are grounded in our fundamental assumptions and views about the principles and powers of the human mind and the structure of the world;
2) To reveal to students their own acquired opinions with their limits and to show them how their cultural upbringing connects with their nature - how it constrains or consummates what they are. In a word, self-knowledge; and,

3) To prepare students in disciplined and responsible ways of thinking about these problems so that, hopefully, the individual student, and, in time, the larger society will achieve a coherent and valid intellectual vision of man and the world and a healthy culture that will be life supporting for both individuals and society.

Finally, there is an understanding of philosophical learning according to which it is directly and unfailingly related to the development of excellence in human character. Most theories of habitual right conduct (i.e., moral action) require that general and broad perspective described by Dewey on the structure of the world and that versatility in the choice of methods which philosophical learning engenders. If such excellence of character <u>is</u> a kind of knowledge, knowledge of culture, of oneself, and of the nature of things, then philosophical learning <u>is</u> the shaping of a good person. That is why the name of Socrates figured very early in these observations - for that is his view. If anything is meant by such learning, it must be, it seems to me, this: the philosophically educated human being can articulate reasons, give causes, spell out whys, wherefores, and hows. Learning of this kind, in compelling us to articulate what we think, what we are, what we ought to be, in leading us to the roots of the world and making us see the constitutional powers of the human mind, gives us convictions, not prejudices and predilections, but reasoned commitments, strong, thought-supported opinions which, in their warranted assertibility and endurance, come close to being knowledge, Socrates thinks, - and I agree - that such knowledge like commitment is contiguous to action, that it leads to potently good conduct immediately without the necessity of an already formed or well-stamped character.

Convictions and reasoned commitment is, then, an educational imperative. It must be at the foundation (i.e., the beginning) of all that we do. The point this paper has attempted to make is that philosophy, more than any other discipline, must assume the responsibility for teaching this lesson. For it is in philosophy that one learns the value of reexamining one's own convictions, while also learning that such reevaluation need not result in a lack of courage in establishing such convictions. In philosophy one learns the value of open inquiry and the toleration of diversity, while at the same time learning that decisions cannot be forestalled forever and that the moment comes when conviction is morally required. So, philosophy cannot wait until the student is in college, it must be at the beginning, middle, and end of all that we do. Indeed, we must improve our ways of extending it both in conjunction with other disciplines and beyond the traditional school environment; into the prisons, libraries, centers, clubs, and various other institutions as well.

All else, however, depends on how philosophical scholars and educational practitioners understand philosophy and its role in the culture and in the education of its young initiates. If it is understood as a responsible discipline grappling with vitally important problems in the culture, problems that make a difference in the development of character in the individual and, by extension, the society, then it will be recognized that philosophy cannot wait and must have an expanding role in education and in the cultural life of the society. It is through the works of: Matt Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp at the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children; Ron Reed at the Analytic Teaching Center at Texas Wesleyan College; Paul Wagner at the

Institute for Logic and Cognitive Studies; Tony Johnson of the Texas Network in Teacher Training in Philosophy for Children; and many others throughout this nation and the world that my hopes have been heightened that we are making progress in that direction.

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Footnotes

1. See Eugene T. Woolf, "The Educational Imperative: Notes and Queries," Contemporary Philosophy, Vol. VIII, No. 10, 1981, p. 9.
2. Plato "Meno" in The Collected Dialogues of Plato. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (eds.). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.
3. See Mark B. Woodhouse, A Preface to Philosophy. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1980.
4. For a more detailed discussion of the role of philosophy in gaining understanding of meaning, knowledge, and the categorical structure of the world, see E. M. Adams, Philosophy and the Modern Mind. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975.

5-10. John Dewey, Democracy and Education. New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1944, p. 326.