

## **Educational Philosophy: Idealism with special reference to Socrates**

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### **Abstract**

*Idealism is perhaps the oldest systematic philosophy in Western culture. From ancient times until the modern era, idealism has been a dominant philosophical influence, and even though that influence has waned at times, it is still a major philosophy and stands as an alternative to our contemporary materialist culture. In terms of American philosophical thought, idealism has a long history, and educational ideology in the nineteenth century was greatly influenced by German idealism. The contribution of Socrates, to the philosophies of learning is well documented. In this paper we want to explore some aspects of their educational philosophy that we believe to be interesting and informative to current thinking and practices.*

*Key Words: Idealism, Education, Aims of Education, Socrates, Virtue.*

### **Introduction**

#### **Idealism as a philosophical doctrine**

Idealism is the philosophical theory that maintains that the ultimate nature of reality is based on mind or ideas. It holds that the so-called external or real world is inseparable from mind, consciousness, or perception. Idealism is any philosophy which argues that the only things knowable are consciousness or the contents of consciousness; not anything in the outside world, if such a place actually exists. Indeed, idealism often takes the form of arguing that the only real things are mental entities, not physical things and argues that reality is somehow dependent upon the mind rather than independent of it. Some narrow versions of idealism argue that our understanding of reality reflects the workings of our mind, first and foremost, that the properties of objects have no standing independent of minds perceiving them. Besides, the nature and identity of the mind in idealism upon which reality is dependent is one issue that has divided idealists of various sorts. Some argue that there is some objective mind outside of nature; some argue that it is simply the common power of reason or rationality; some argue that it is the collective mental faculties of society; and some focus simply on the minds of individual human beings.

In short, the main tenant of idealism is that ideas and knowledge are the truest reality. Many things in the world change, but ideas and knowledge are enduring. Idealism was often referred to as idealism. Idealists believe that ideas can change lives. The most important part of a person is the mind. It is to be nourished and developed.

Idealism in Education

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The credit of introducing Idealism in education goes to Plato, Pestalozzi and Froebel who are world renowned educators. According to them, Idealism pervades all the creation and it is an undying, unlimited and ultimate force which reigns supreme over all mind and matter. They all advocate its great importance in education and lay more emphasis on aims and principles of education than on methods, aids and devices.

In general, idealists have shown a great concern for education, and many have written extensively about it. Plato made education the core of his utopian state in *The Republic*, and Augustine also gave extensive attention to the need for Christians to become aware of the importance of education. Kant and Hegel wrote about education or referred to it a great deal in their writings, and both made their living as teachers. More recent idealists such as A. Bronson Alcott, William Torrey Harris, Herman Horne, William Hocking, Giovanni Gentile, and J. Donald Butler have tried systematically to apply idealist principles to the theory and practice of education.

The principle that education should concentrate solely on conceptual and moral development is an educational legacy of idealism. Teaching should deal with abstract subjects such as mathematics and philosophy, with principles expounded before application. The teacher's role is to draw out the knowledge of principles that learners already possess and help learners to organize these coherently. In this view of education, teachers are very important. Teachers are also needed for the clarification of ideas, because texts alone are insufficient. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates maintains that the written word is subject to misinterpretation by readers. Dialogue is preferable because the teacher can offer clarification or challenge misinterpretations, guiding learners towards true principles and away from faulty conclusions.

#### **Idealism and Aims of Education**

Idealists generally agree that education should not only stress development of the mind but also encourage students to focus on all things of lasting value. Along with Plato, they believe that the aim of education should be directed toward the search for true ideas. Another important idealist aim is character development because the search for truth demands personal discipline and steadfast character. This aim is prevalent in the writings of Kant, Harris, Horne, Gentile, and others. What they want in society is not just the literate, knowledgeable person, but the good person as well.

Emphasis is placed on developing the mind, personal discipline, and character development. A person should be literate and of good moral character. Idealist education involves depth of learning, a holistic approach that involves teaching the whole rather than its parts. The best method of learning for Plato was the dialectic, a process where ideas are put into battle against each other, with the most significant idea winning the battle. Knowledge was not important just for the material needs that it met. The idealist is not concerned with turning out students with technical skills so much as having students with a broad view and understanding of the world in which they live. Self-realization and self-education are very important in idealism. Self-realization is the main aim of education.

The important factor in education at any level for idealists is teaching children to think. Teachers should help students to explore texts for ideas about the purposes of life, family and the nature of peer pressures, and the problems of growing up. Idealists believe that ideas can change lives and

that classical literature can be used and explored to help solve problems in today's world. Creativity will be encouraged when students immerse themselves in the creative thinking of others and when they are encouraged to reflect.

Since idealists believe in character development, they also believe that the teacher should be a role model for students to emulate. Teaching is considered a moral calling. The teacher's role is to be a skilful questioner who encourages students to think and ask more questions in an environment that is suitable for learning. While the lecture method is still important in an idealist's education system, it is considered more of a way to convey information and to help students comprehend ideas. Since teachers cannot always be present when learning occurs, they must attempt to stimulate students so that learning occurs even when they are not present. Project based learning is an example of a self directed learning activity where learning can occur without a teacher's presence.

Idealism has been influential in education for a considerable amount of time. It is considered a conservative philosophy because of its emphasis in preserving cultural traditions. The strengths of idealism include encouraging thinking and cognition, promoting cultural learning, and providing for character development of students. Teachers are considered valuable parts of the educational process who should strive to provide a comprehensive, systematic, and holistic approach to learning that stresses self realization. Today, science has challenged idealism and brought about challenges to idealistic principles. Science is based on hypothesis and tentativeness, but idealism promotes a finished and absolute universe waiting to be discovered. Idealism has often been linked with traditional religion.

The weakening of religion has led to the weakening of idealism as a philosophy. Through Plato's ruler kings, and Augustine's emphasis on the monastic life, it has been said that idealism leads to intellectual elitism. In the past, education was considered important for the upper classes of society, marking education as a luxury. Vocational and technical studies were considered good enough for the general public. Idealistic education was considered bookish and lacking relevance. It is argued that the character development aspect of the philosophy involved conformity and subservience on the part of the learner. This type of character development was considered to stifle creativity and self direction, making students naïve and ready to accept ideas without serious examination.

### **Socrates**

In the whole human history there had been no greater humanist, philosopher and lover of wisdom than Socrates. This short, stocky, stout, blear-eyed and snub-nosed man, with a large mouth and thick lips, careless in his dress, clumsy and uncouth, was perhaps the most beloved teacher of his disciples. This is simply clear by the writings of his main disciple Plato.

### **Fundamental principles of Socrates Education**

Knowledge is The Goal of Life: The concern of Socrates is to define the concept of good or Summum Bonum. Summum bonum (latin for the highest good) is an expression used in philosophy, particularly in medieval philosophy and in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, to describe the ultimate importance, the singular and most ultimate end which human beings ought to pursue. It is some end that is not subordinate to anything else. Happiness, pleasure, virtue, self-

realization, power, obedience to the voice of duty, to conscience, to the will of God, good will, perfection have been claimed as ultimate aims of human conduct in the history of ethical theory. The summum bonum is generally thought of as being an end in itself, and at the same time containing all other goods. As for as Socrates is concerned he considered knowledge to be the Highest Good and therefore the true aim of life. This was so because he believed that knowledge was a sine qua non of all virtues and that if we know what is right, we cannot do wrong. Therefore, the knowledge of self and society was the key to moral life. Virtue is nothing else than knowledge.

Socrates used to say that “Knowledge is Virtue” and he tried to establish the proposition thus: Every man seeks happiness and happiness results from good deeds. In order to do good one must know what good is. That is, one must have the knowledge of the good. Therefore, knowledge is a condition sine qua non of moral conduct.

For Socrates morality is guided by knowledge. But difference lies in the kind of knowledge and the kind of goodness. For Socrates knowledge is through concepts. Concepts are always in the mind of everyone and they have to be enkindled by skillful questioning. The kind of knowledge to which Socrates is pointing is not mere intellectual achievement. It is the kind of knowledge which controls the will and necessarily issues in action. Thus Socrates gave equal importance to will and desire in moral conduct. But he did not subscribe to the view that there was some antimony between will and reason, or that dichotomy existed between will and reason. He firmly believed that no one could do any bad knowing it to be bad, nor could anybody do some good unconsciously. Therefore, for him will was subject to reason and was moulded by knowledge. A moral good consisted in knowing what is good and doing it. There could be no virtue which was blind and unconscious. Without knowledge there could be no good and no virtue.

Socrates concept of knowledge is no ordinary one. According to Socrates, a man of knowledge is a man of self control. Therefore, the idea of knowledge, for Socrates, presupposes government of reason over will and desire. Socrates moral theory, therefore, is a blend of reason and will in a harmony.

**Virtue can be Taught:** According to Socrates virtue was knowledge and since knowledge was a system and a science, it could be taught. We sometimes give up many bad practices on learning their true nature. But, on the other hand, this is also a well-known fact that we know better but do worse. Whether virtue is a matter of practice or matter of knowledge is a difficult question. Some emphasize the former whereas philosophers like Socrates stress the latter. However, as a matter of fact, there are both elements in virtue.

**Virtue is One:** The traditional Greek moral theory held that there are four virtues, namely, Wisdom, Courage, Temperance, and Justice. Socrates believed in a single virtue, that of knowledge's. According to him knowledge was the virtue of virtues and all virtues were progeny of knowledge.

**Virtue is Bliss:** Accordingly to Socrates there can be no happiness without virtue and no happiness is equal to that of virtue. Therefore virtue, according to him, is bliss.

### **Conclusion**

Idealism occupies an important place in the field of education and its contributions are valuable

and useful to bring about necessary reforms and changes in the policy of education. This philosophy has become a milestone which determines the way for the solution of educational problems of the present and future educationists. Idealistic education is essential for the peaceful living of human being and is devoted to social good and national welfare. This philosophy can make a creative contribution to the educationists to overcome the various problems in Indian and western education. Hence, this philosophy of education can play an active role in making education more purposeful. Socrates educational philosophy is the most ancient and comprehensive philosophy and its contribution to educational thought is solid and profound. His philosophy gives a higher place to mental and spiritual qualities than to the physical world so that men can lead a peaceful and contented life. Thus, the aim of education is the perfection of the individual. His philosophy leads to the spiritual insight and to the highest moral and spiritual conduct.

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