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# THE AIMS OF EDUCATION

by J. CHR. COETZEE

**D**R. COETZEE is Principal and Vice-Chancellor of Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, where he occupies the Chair of Education, and his occasional contributions to our pages are highly appreciated. The aims and methods of public education, as practised in the Christian National Schools of Afrikaans-speaking South Africa, have features which are unfamiliar to educationists in this country, and it is good to have this personal exposition of the principles on which they are based.

## I. GENERAL DEFINITION OF EDUCATION

**T**HE education of man is his journey through life on earth. The journey begins at a definite point of departure, viz., his birth, and ends at a definite point of arrival, viz., his death. The education of man is at the same time the history of his life on earth. Any journey has milestones or phases. So man's history on earth has milestones or phases, or periods or stages. In this history we usually distinguish between the stages of infancy, childhood, youth, adulthood, manhood and old age. The same stages can be pointed out in his education. This journey through life proceeds through certain, more or less definite stages. In educational discussions three of these stages are of particular interest: infancy, childhood and youth. We say this because education is sometimes restricted to the journey from a point of absolute immaturity to a point of relative maturity, from a point of absolute dependence to a point of relative independence, from a point of decided lack of culture and moral freedom to a point of definite culture and moral freedom.

The main characteristic of man's journey through life is the fact of growth, physical and mental. We may, therefore, tentatively define his education as the process of his growth and development through life. At the starting point of life man is wholly dependent and immature: each immature individual is dependent on some mature individual. Right from the moment of birth man needs the assistance of other human beings; he depends upon them for his physical needs and also for his mental needs.

Physical and mental growth depends on the assistance of other human beings. The assistance that is needed is the direction and guidance given to his growth and development from the point of

departure to the point of arrival. In educational thinking this amounts to direction in his growth from a state of absolute immaturity and total dependence to a state of relative maturity and independence. Education means, therefore, in the restricted sense, the process whereby some human being directs and guides the growth and development of some other human being towards some end or goal in life. This definition of education involves some six elements or qualifications: a human enterprise, a process not a thing, individual personal growth and development, direction and guidance, agents, intention. The individual who undergoes this process is called the educand (child or scholar or student), the agent who guides and directs, the educator (parent, teacher), and the process of direction and growth, education. Although man grows and develops as long as life lasts, in educational thinking we confine ourselves to the stages of his immaturity, viz., infancy, childhood and youth. Beyond the stage of youth we speak of education only in the broad sense as mainly undirected or unguided further growth, perhaps as self-education; there is now no outside agent directing and guiding the growth and development.

Essentially, therefore, education is a dual process—one of direction and one of growth. In the past, even today, some other terms were or are being used instead of direction and growth: for direction some thinkers use formation, guidance, discipline, preparation, communication; and for growth, natural development, unfolding. Whichever of these terms we use, the process of education must be viewed (1) from the point of view of the educand—and then the process is one of growth, development, unfolding; and (2) from the point of view of the educator—then it is one of direction, guidance, formation, discipline. Hence education may be succinctly defined as the process of growth of one human being under the direction of another.

## II. BASIC PROBLEM IN OUR EDUCATIONAL THINKING

In our thinking about education, we have to do with at least three basic, fundamental or ultimate questions. We shall have to discuss two of these briefly and the third more or less fully or comprehensively.

The three basic problems are (1) the problem of man, the world and life, (2) the problem of human values, and (3) the problem of aims in life and education. The topic for this lecture is the third problem, viz., the aims of education. But any exposition of the aims of education without a consideration of the basic prob-

lems of man, the world and life and of human values will necessarily be inadequate.

The first two problems concern the fundamental educational problems of the origin, nature and destination of man in this world. Our view of the origin, nature and destination of man in this world is decisive for our conception of the aims of education. Our exposition here will be nothing more than preliminary to our discussion of the aims of education. What one thinks and believes concerning the problems of man, the world and life and of human values, decides what one thinks and believes concerning the aims of education.

About the origin of man, the world and life there are only two possible answers: man, world and life have either been created or evolved. Creation and evolution are the only possible alternative answers to this problem. About the destiny of man, the world and life, there can again be only two alternative answers: everything ends in and with death or there is another life and world after death. Death is either the end of things or the beginning of newer things. Considerations of origin and destiny are philosophical and therefore totally dependent on the view of life and the world one holds.

About the nature of man there are no such radically different views possible, if we leave for the moment out of consideration the question of the spiritual nature of man. There is more or less general agreement on the following characterization of human nature. Human nature is unique; man is a body-mind being; he has a large brain but very few, rather indefinite, instincts; he has the longest period of dependency of all beings; he is capable of acquiring culture; he learns to use a language and many other symbols; he is gifted with the powers of reasoning, memory, imagination, anticipation, self-regard and self-transcendence, and strongly loves his freedom of movement, speech and thinking. Many thinkers believe that he is finally also a spiritual being. All thinkers accept the undeniable facts that man grows and develops, that he declines and decays, that he retains his personal identity throughout life, and that he is the product of two fundamental growth factors, heredity and environment.

In briefly discussing the problems of human values, we must pay attention to three important items: the origin, the form and the status of these values in human life and development. The problem of values is intimately connected with the problem of variety in man, the world and life: the concept of values arises only in man's relation to other human beings, the world and life

in general. And the basic cause for the origin of values is man's indisputable interest in and desire to know other men, the world and life itself. The problem of values is thus fundamentally a philosophical problem. If one accepts that man is a psycho-physical being, one must distinguish between two fundamental forms of human values: bodily or physical values and mental values; the first type of values is usually designated as material values, and the second as spiritual values. Amongst the bodily or material values we may enumerate: bodily growth and health, physical excellence and beauty, amenities of living, wealth in money or in material, social status and professional position held. Amongst the mental or spiritual values are to be reckoned: individual and social development, intellectual, moral and volitional ideals, aesthetic and spiritual values. The status of these values in a particular case depends on one's life and world view. To the materialist material values are of first importance; to the egoist individual values take first place; to the intellectualist intellectual pre-eminence is the ideal; to the man of deep moral conviction moral issues are the decisive values in human life; for the man of art artistic and aesthetic values are of fundamental significance.

Our views on the origin, nature and destiny of man and on the origin, forms and status of human values define our aims in education.

We now come to a more or less comprehensive exposition of the aims of education.

### III. ANALYSIS OF PROBLEM OF AIMS IN EDUCATION

Education then is a process of growth and development of a human being under the guidance and direction of some other human being. This process starts and ends somewhere. It starts with birth and finally ends with death, speaking in very general terms. In educational parlance, however, the term education is reserved for the process of growth from birth to maturity through the stages of infancy, childhood and youth. The end of each stage may be considered the aim of the education of the child during that stage. We may, therefore, put the problems of the aims of education in detail more or less as follows: What are the aims of the education of the child during infancy or during childhood or during youth? We may even restrict the problem still further and ask: What is the aim of education in the kindergarten or the primary school or the secondary school? We may go into even more detail: What is the aim of education in the first, second, third and higher standards at school? The process may be re-

duced still further: What is the aim of education in a school subject, e.g., the mother-tongue, history, mathematics, etc. ? And in the last instance the question may be raised: What is the aim of a particular lesson in any subject of any standard ? For example, what is the aim in teaching children the first multiplication table in arithmetic or the causes of the Great Trek in history ?

A central problem in education is, therefore, the determination and choice of the guidance and direction of a person's growth. This is the decision on the aim or aims of education.

The choice of direction or the definition of the aims of education is not an easy task. It cannot be decided on by pure chance or by purely empirical considerations. The choice of the direction is fundamentally determined by our choice of values in life. A materialist, an intellectualist, a realist, an idealist, a naturalist, an experimentalist, a pragmatist, and empiricist, each has his own definition of the aim or aims of education, because the statement of choice of aim or direction depends on one's life and world view. Logic demands that every thinker should have a consistent and well founded formulation of the aim(s) of education—founded on his view of life and the world.

This close relation between statement of aim and formulation of life and world view holds good for any particular or general aim. By this we mean that our view of life and world determines all types or forms of our aim(s) in education. In general we may distinguish between immediate, remote and ultimate aims, between relative and absolute, variable and constant, immanent and transcendent, implicit and explicit aims of education. Our philosophy of life defines our immediate, our remote, our final or ultimate aim(s) in education, our relative and our absolute, our variable and our constant, our immanent and our transcendent, our implicit and our explicit aim(s).

The history of education, however, teaches us that there were, and still are, only two groups of aims. The first group are all man-centred: in these definitions man is the beginning and the end of man's education. Man-centred aims are as varied as the differences in man's philosophies of life. They are idealistic, realistic, naturalistic, socialistic, pragmatistic, positivistic, experimentalistic aims of education, all different in particulars, all the same in being man-centred. The second group are all God-centred: in these definitions God is the beginning and the end of man's education. God-centred aims are as varied as the differences in man's religious beliefs. They are Christian, Mohammedan, Hindu, Buddhist ; Roman Catholic, Protestant, Lutheran, Anglican,

Calvinistic ; all different in particulars, all the same in being God-centred.

The above exposition is more or less of a general character. We must, however, come down to some particular statement. In the following paragraph I am attempting to formulate my own personal and particular statement or formulation of the aims of education. This is done not in the spirit of a know-all or a possess-all, but in the hope of giving you an illustration of the general principles expounded above—an academic illustration of the undeniable relation between our life and world view on the one hand, and our statement of the aims of education on the other.

#### IV. A PERSONAL VIEW

My personal formulation of the aims of education then is determined by my view of life and world, my philosophy of life. Before formulating the aims of education I shall have to state very briefly but as clearly as possible the basic conceptions of my life and world view. Any view of life and the world is a view, a theory, never a scientific fact or statement ; it is even a matter of belief. One can never prove one's theory or view of life and the world. The only thing that one can do is to try and state the basic principles of one's view, and having stated them, try to build on this foundation a systematic, logical thought-structure. In formulating my aims of education, I shall attempt to do so consistent with the foundation of my view of the world and life. My formulation of the aims of education can then be faulty only if it cannot be reconciled logically with my life and world view. Just to make assurance doubly sure, I must admit that my formulation is not for general acceptance and need not be so. It is just an illustration of a very important argument in my exposition: the total relation between one's view of life and the world and one's statement of the aims of education.

My life and world view is God-centred: God is the Alpha and the Omega of my view. The following categorical summary must suffice for my special purpose now.

- (a) I believe and confess that there is one only simple and spiritual Being, God, eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly just, wise and good.
- (b) I know Him by two means: by His creation, preservation and government of the universe ; and by His holy and divine Word embodied in the Holy Scriptures or the Bible.
- (c) I believe that God created the heaven, the earth, and all creatures to serve their Creator.
- (d) I believe that God created man after His own image and

- likeness, good, righteous, and holy—man as the only being so created, fundamentally different from all other creatures.
- (e) I believe that man is specifically gifted in body and mind—no other creature being so gifted. He is a proper object for education.
  - (f) I believe that man wilfully subjected himself to sin, and consequently to death, and thereby lost all his excellent gifts and retained only a few small remains thereof.
  - (g) I believe that God in His mercy and justice elected and redeemed some by the sacrifice of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. These elected and redeemed are the real objects of a full God-centred education.
  - (h) I believe that the final, all-embracing aim of human existence on earth is to know, to serve and to love God, our Creator, and that His knowledge, service and love are ordained primarily not for human holiness and salvation, but for the glorification of the name of God, our Lord. I believe that the decisive question in human life is not the salvation of man but the glory of God.

I am now in a position clearly to state my formulation of the aims of education.

With many other educational thinkers, I distinguish between immediate, remote and ultimate aims. Some of these aims are relative, variable and immanent, but my ultimate aim is absolute, constant and transcendent.

My immediate aims are the physical, the mental and the social growth and development of the child. The remote aims are less relative, variable and immanent: amongst these I reckon the civic, ethical, aesthetic and even philosophical growth and development of the child. As my ultimate, absolute, constant and transcendent aim I would state the religious or spiritual growth and development of the child.

I may just briefly illustrate one or more of these aims. The physical growth and development of the child includes health, bodily development through exercise and play, skill in handling objects and instruments. The mental growth and development of the child will require the acquisition of knowledge in the various fields of science and the humanities. The ethical growth and development of the child concerns the training of the child in his relations to other human beings founded on the fundamental principle: "love thy neighbour as thyself". The ultimate growth and development of the child culminates in the knowledge, the service and the love of God.

All education consists in knowing, serving and loving God and in knowing God's creation and using it for the glorification of God, our Father in heaven. Every individual lesson in whatever school subject, be it language, history, science, mathematics, must be done in such a way that it contributes to a better knowledge, a sincerer service, a deeper love of the Creator. After all, I confess that I may know God not only from Holy Scriptures but also from Nature as created, preserved and governed by the Almighty. Every thought, every word and every act in my life must be directed towards knowing, serving and loving God. Every aim in education, immediate, remote and ultimate, is directed towards the same ideal: knowledge, service and love of God. Man can attain to this ideal only if he becomes "perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works", and the sum total of all good works is the glory of God.

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