

Examination and Reflection on Idealism as a Philosophy of Education

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Abstract. The purpose of philosophy of education is to continually investigate and explore improved ways of thinking. Idealism, one of the oldest educational philosophies, has had a significant impact on the field of education throughout history, from Plato and medieval Europe to Kant, Hegel, and the present day. By examining the philosophical underpinnings of Idealism and its interpretation of education, this text explores the advantages and disadvantages of Idealism as a means of solving current and future educational problems. It also offers the possibility of exploring better ways of thinking and expanding professional self-development. The text avoids utilitarian treatment of the topic and maintains a balanced perspective.

Keywords: Idealism; Philosophy of Education; Idealists.

1. Introduction

Idealism is a long standing philosophical system in Western culture with the theory of ideas being a highly influential trend from ancient times to the present day. Its origins can be traced back to Plato, the great philosopher of ancient Greece, whose idealism has had a significant impact on Western idealism, traditional rationalist philosophy, and medieval theology. Hegel praised, "Plato is one of the figures of world-historical significance, and his philosophy is one of the creations of world-historical status. It has had an extremely important influence on the development of culture and spirituality from the time of its creation until all subsequent ages.[1]" Of course, with the development of the times, the theory of philosophy is also evolving. Therefore, scholars at home and abroad have also paid attention to the development and role of idealism.

From the existing research results on idealism, the author found a phenomenon: the research of the existing research results focuses on the relationship between idealism and religion, Plato's and Hegel's idealism, etc., and less on idealism as a philosophy of education. In fact, many Idealists have devoted a great deal of ink to painting their vision of education in their writings. In Plato's *The Republic*, education has become the centre of the ideal state. At the same time, the "cave metaphor[2]" suggests that education is necessary for the king of philosophy. Kant and Hegel also wrote about education and made a living as teachers. Slightly more recently, William Hocking, W.T. Harris, and Herman Horn, among others, have directly applied philosophy theory principles to educational theory and practice. Idealism, as a philosophy of education, requires an in-depth understanding of its philosophical underpinnings in order to more fully understand its exposition of education, and at the same time to examine and reflect on it to better appreciate its educational value.

2. Philosophical Foundations of Idealism

Idealism as a vast philosophical system is also biased by the number of its philosophers. No two leaves in the world are the same, and the same is true for the ideas of philosophers. Therefore, in order to have an in-depth understanding of the philosophical foundations of Ideology, it is most appropriate to examine the different philosophical approaches of its representatives. In the millennium of the development of philosophy theory, according to the time, it can be roughly divided into the development of ancient philosophy theory and the development of modern philosophy theory.

2.1 The Development of Ancient Idealism

2.1.1 Plato's Idealism

Plato was a great philosopher and thinker in ancient Greece, whose masterpieces include *The Republic* and *The Laws*. In *The Republic*, through the "allegory of the cave", Plato distinguishes the material world from the world of ideas. The world of Ideas is the origin of all true knowledge and the highest good. This is the famous "ontology with the doctrine of separation as its essence, and teleology with the good as its highest principle[3]". To achieve this "highest good", one needs the dialectic, which enables one to transcend the real and obtain pure true knowledge. Plato played a very important role in the development of dialectics, and Hegel once clearly pointed out that "in ancient times, Plato was called the inventor of dialectics. This is indeed true in so far as it refers to the fact that in Plato's philosophy dialectic appears for the first time in the form of a free science, i.e., in the form of objectivity.[4]" Plato's dialectic can be divided into two categories: one is the dialectic of dialogue, pioneered by Plato's teacher, Socrates, and specifically embodied in Plato's early dialogues; the other is the dialectic of discursive thinking, which was later inherited and developed by Hegel, and specifically embodied in Plato's later dialogues[5]. The source of either dialectic is a thesis or point of view, which is viewed both positively and negatively. Through dialectics, one can reach the "highest good" and move from the material world to the world of ideas. When it is developed to a certain extent, it becomes the philosopher-king. According to Plato, the philosopher-king is not only a thinker, but must also be a doer. He has the responsibility and duty to control the affairs of the state. The king of philosophy not only possessed enough wisdom, but also had to be a good person because "Ignorance is the root of all evil." In another area, Plato proposed the "doctrine of reminiscence". In the *Meno*, a boy who works as a labourer is used as an example, and through questioning, the boy reveals the Pythagorean Theorem. According to Plato, man does not create knowledge, but at most discovers it. Since there is knowledge, the soul can certainly recall it. The soul would have known everything, and since everything is similar in nature, we can discover everything else by recalling one thing[6]. Plato's influence on subsequent generations has been such that, as the philosopher Whitehead put it, "modern philosophy is but a series of footnotes to Plato's doctrines.[7]"

2.1.2 Religious Idealism

The idealism has had a significant impact on religion. Augustine was heavily influenced by the idealism and came into contact with the Platonists and Neoplatonists through the Christian faith, strongly agreeing with Plato's views. Similar to Plato's division of the world into the material world and the world of Ideas, Augustine viewed the two worlds as the world of God and the world of man. People can spiritually transcend the mundane world through faith and contemplation. Moreover, Augustine agreed with Plato that "man cannot create knowledge". Therefore, he proposed an intuitive approach to education. Augustine once asked the profound question, "Can one man teach another?" Such a profound question was intended to clarify that "learning is internal and true knowledge comes from God"[8]. Religious idealism has had a significant impact on education, and Augustine's discourse has also profoundly influenced Christian education.

2.2 The Development of Modern Idealism

Time moves on to the 15th and 16th centuries, a period in which the main feature of the development of idealism is that their subjective and systematic nature becomes more evident.

Descartes was a famous French philosopher, thinker and mathematician. He developed the "Method of Doubt", i.e., doubting everything, including himself. This led to Descartes' very famous proposition that I think, therefore I am. "I think" affirms the centrality of the mind in man's relation to the world. When Descartes' consciousness deduces one idea from another, it finds that there is no idea that is not interconnected with other ideas, except "perfect being". And through this "perfect being" comes the realisation that God is the source of all things. In fact, the essence of "perfect being"

is to prove the existence of God. In this way, Descartes built his philosophical system on the basis of "I think" and "God".

The Irish philosopher Berkeley, on the other hand, argued that to exist is to be perceived[9]. According to Berkeley, everything exists because a mind perceives it. The English philosopher Hume, on the other hand, was extremely opposed to this view. His book *Treatise upon Human Nature* also attacked the idealism violently. While Berkeley believed that he had destroyed atheism and positivism, Hume believed that he had destroyed the concepts of God and mind[10].

The German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, attempted a "Copernican revolution" in philosophy. Kant's idealism came from his concern for the process of human thought. He reconciled the rationalism of Descartes with the empiricism of Bacon. Based on the two, he constructed a philosophical system of synthesis a priori judgments that could integrate rationalism and empiricism[11]. Kant rejected Berkeley's philosophical position of "mind" and Hume's scepticism. The former because it denied the possibility of scientific law, and the latter because Kant criticised Hume's lack of holistic examination on the basis of his synthesis a priori judgments as a new form of judgement. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, he also examined the field of morality and ethics, which he elaborated throughout his writings on education, with an influential focus on the development of human character. Kant's system of thought had a major impact on later Western philosophy.

The German philosopher Hegel brought the development of modern idealism to its zenith. His philosophical system consists of three areas: logic, nature, and spirituality. The corresponding three-step masterpieces include *Logic*, *Philosophy of Right*, and *Phenomenology of Mind*. These three aspects also determine that the main characteristic of Hegel's philosophical system is the movement towards a richer, more complex and more complete synthesis. This has similarities with Marx's thought as we know it.

3. Philosophical Elaboration of Education

Philosophy of education applies philosophical concepts to the study of educational issues, through which it can provide us with broader and novel perspectives, and then think about educational issues, including what kind of educational purposes to formulate, what kind of curricula to prepare, what kind of teaching methods to adopt, and the status and role of teachers in the process of teaching and learning, and so on.

3.1 Educational Purpose

In conjunction with the above, Berkeley's "to be is to be perceived" emphasises the importance of the mind, and Augustine argued that matter usually exists in a harmful way[12]. Idealism, on the other hand, places more emphasis on learning about the abstract, non-material realm, and they believe that the mind is more important than matter, and therefore the development of the mind is something they emphasise. At the same time, idealists all seek truth. Augustine, for example, even considered truth to be of overwhelming spiritual significance; Hegel, on the other hand, argued that it is not the truth itself that is important, but the process of pursuing it, which by its very nature emphasises the eternal value in truth. Thus, when reading a work, the aim is not to acquire some formula of truth, but to grasp the enduring ideas it holds and to elevate the mind. This is the main reason why idealists support the reading of classical writings.

In the process of exploring the mind and pursuing eternal values, idealists have also gradually explored the important factor of "self", which means that the subjective nature of conceptual development has become more obvious. Descartes' "I think" and Berkeley's "mind" reflect the great influence of conceptualism on the educational view of the self. When the self is in society, the relationship between the individual and society, or the part and the whole, is another important concept explored by idealists. According to Hegel, the individual must be connected to the whole. It is even stated that in order to reach a true understanding of the most self, one must relate oneself to

the whole of existence, to the universe[13]. Subsequent idealists have favoured a focus on the individual. The education of the will became central in Horn's educational thought, which aimed to produce individuals with intellectual and personal qualities. The American psychologist Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory revolves around the gradual stepping up of the individual's needs, culminating in self-actualisation. The Italian conceptualist Chintli argued directly that self-realisation is the ultimate aim of education.

Idealists are also concerned with the development of moral character. Kant was a prominent advocate. There are two things of which the deeper and more persistent my contemplation, the more and more enduring will be the wonder and awe they evoke in my mind, the one being the vastness and splendour of the starry heavens above us, and the other the sublime moral law of our hearts[14]. The latter is the development of character which Kant emphasised. He pursued the idea of goodness by making character development the proper purpose of education. Horn's education of the will develops character by teaching students to resist temptation. Chintilly shared Hegel's view that the individual is closely connected to society. Therefore, he advocated the development of loyalty; students should be loyal to their teachers and individuals should be loyal to society or government.

3.2 About the Curriculum and Teaching Methods

Regarding the curriculum, idealists favour courses that have depth and broad concepts, while teaching students to think[15]. An example of this is the study of the classics. Idealists believe that the classics contain many important concepts, and that all of these concepts help the student's mind to think and add to the student's experience. Idealists believe that ideas can change people's lives. Like philosopher Whitehead's book, *The Adventure of Ideas*, ideas have a profound effect on society, on the universe, and on philosophy. Of course, there is more than just a liberal arts curriculum; idealists also advocate a curriculum in the natural sciences and believe that science and the arts are necessary.

More idealists focus on the dialectical method, which they believe will give them integrated understanding and universal concepts, and which requires a critical attitude as well as a long period of study. During the Middle Ages, dialectic was widely used in educational techniques. Churchmen defended Christian doctrine through the proper use of dialectic so that people would believe in them. Idealists sought truth, and Augustine advocated acquiring knowledge through the intuitive method, rejecting a focus on materialism de and dialogue with God through intuition. Subsequently, a conceptual method of learning was developed that included both dialectic and intuition, i.e., a method that included both dialectic and contemplation[16]. Using this method, some conceptualists tend to study the great concepts of great works, to dialogue with mentors, and to share their experiences.

In addition, idealists are more favourable to the self-directed teaching method and the lecture method. Self-actualisation is an important aim of education; therefore, learning can only be done by the self, and the role of the teacher is to provide students with materials and stimulate their interest in learning. The lecture method is valued by the idealists because it can stimulate students' minds and can help them understand various ideas.

3.3 Role and Status of Teachers

Idealists hold the role and status of the teacher in high regard. Idea theorists are not only concerned with the search for truth, but also with the person who searches for truth. Socrates serves as a teacher in the minds of the Idealists because he thinks before he acts. Teachers help students to think, but they also promote their character development and moral calling. In addition, teachers need to be consistently attentive to the diversity of learning purposes.

4. Reflections on Idealism as a Philosophy of Education

Idealism as a philosophy of education has been influential in education for a long time. Beginning with Plato in ancient Greece, through medieval scriptural philosophy, to Kant and Hegel, and

continuing to the present day, the role of philosophy theory has been strong. But these influences may not always be beneficial, and their impact on education needs to be viewed holistically.

4.1 Useless Knowledge

Idealism places too much emphasis on the spiritual and cognitive dimensions, and not enough attention is paid to the emotional dimension[17]. Yet the student is a whole person, and focusing on books alone will lead to nerdiness, which is not the standard for training students. When this nerdiness reaches an extreme, the entire curriculum can also become imbalanced with student learning. For example, excessive study of the classics, the entirety of the student's learning is placed in the classics, but the fact is that the student is an individual in the present society, he has social relations, and the learning of such social relations is not instantly available. At the same time, there has been a great lag in indulging in classical writings, believing that classical ideas can be a universal way of dealing with the problems of the present, while ignoring contemporary and modern ideas. Therefore, the knowledge of the conceptualist is "useless knowledge".

4.2 Elitism

In *The Republic*, Plato looks to the true philosopher to rule the state, the Philosopher King. Only the rule of the Philosopher King can establish a just state and realise Plato's ideal of justice. The Philosopher King is the elite of the many philosophers and the one Plato wishes to cultivate. Augustine believed that religious life was superior to secular life and therefore monks could receive special education. Philosophers believed that general education should be for the upper classes of society, and that only a select number of people who were suitable for education should be educated, not for the majority of the population. Although the idealists also tried their best to expand the scope of education, they believed that: only vocational education is enough for ordinary people, and liberal arts education is only suitable for the elite[18]. This is very different from today's philosophy of education. At present, education is not a luxury that only some people have, but a right that the vast majority of people should enjoy. The United Nations General Assembly's Education Summit has even recognised the learning crisis as a global challenge, which shows the urgency of making education accessible to the majority of the population. Since the last century, China has gradually made nine years of compulsory education universal, so that all children of school age can receive basic education. Education for all is also a major trend in the development of education today.

4.3 Character Development

It was mentioned above that conceptualists focus on character development. Why do idealists focus on character development? What kind of character do they call character development? W.T. Harris says that the first rule taught to children is order, and students must obey that order[19]. What the philosophy theorists call character development is more of a compliance, a submission. Prolonged periods of this type of training can wear down a student's mind as well as his or her creativity. Each student is uniform, like a batch of "dolls". Students are human beings with personalities, not "dolls" bound by rules, but, of course, within morally legitimate rules.

This is not to say that idealism does not have a favourable impact on education. For example, idealists are very concerned with character development, which is why the factor of character education has a higher status in the field of education, and people pay attention to character development; Idealists are concerned with cultural preservation and acquisition because they focus on the concepts in the classics, and so on. Both the positive and negative aspects of idealism should be understood and appreciated, and the results should be seen as a key to a better way of thinking that will help solve our current and future educational problems.

5. Summary

Idealism, as a philosophy of education, is also linked to parts of our present-day education in miniature through descriptions of his philosophical foundations, interpretations of education, and reflections. For example, the seminar form of learning in today's university education is similar to idealists discussing classic works with experienced instructors. At the same time, it is possible to see the advantages and disadvantages for education through the idealism lens. And this pros and cons must not be utilitarianised him, but brought into perspective to look at education in order to solve our educational problems. Looking at education from a philosophical perspective is more able to see the interrelationships between the purposes of education, methods and concepts of schooling such as the curriculum and the role of the teacher, and to understand the relationship between the theory and practice of education in terms of the two opposites, support and attack. It helps individuals to expand their personal and professional development in depth and breadth.

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