

CAN METAPHYSICS BE OUTMODED? A REVIEW OF METAPHYSICS AS A FOUNDATION FOR EDUCATIONAL THOUGHT

Ayeni Jerome O. PhD

Department of Educational Foundations and Management
Ekiti State University, Ekiti State, Nigeria

Abstract

Philosophy and education are recognised in this paper as interrelated disciplines that share the concepts of knowledge and values in relation to man and development. Metaphysics as a speculative branch of philosophy was examined to be a foundation for education. The paper appreciates the scientific approach to investigation in education but calls attention to the need for metaphysics as a first approach to the understanding of science. Science was acclaimed to be a branch of philosophy in early centuries before it emancipated with the empirical approach to investigation. This has assumed a popular approach to education research. The paper submits on the need for the study of metaphysics as a first step to investigating issues and concepts in education, irrespective of the approach to education research.

Keywords: Educational thoughts, metaphysics

Introduction

Philosophy and education are two interrelated disciplines. This is because both centre on man and development. Education makes use of philosophy both as a foundation and the culmination of imparting knowledge and values for human development. The activity of philosophizing on the other hand has at its focus human development through critical thinking on and evaluation of knowledge and values.

The process of educating and philosophizing dates back to the beginning of man when man comes to awareness of himself, his environment and the perception of the world at large and learns to establish meaningful relationships. Such relationships are built through effective use of reason as man interacts with people and other things in nature. Thus the process is natural. The activity became structured into a formal system at some points in history. The concern of this paper is not the historical trend of the activity rather it is interested in critically wading into the nexus of philosophy and education for human intellectual development. Interest is in metaphysics because of its speculative nature.

Formal philosophy makes systematic inquiry into issues about man and the world. Such issues inevitably become matters of concern for education since education is about man and the world. Philosophy provides a base for educational principles and policies by interpreting research findings in relation to the aims and objectives of education.

Kneller (1971) once remarked:

Educational philosophy depends on general or formal philosophy to the extent that the problems of education are of a general philosophical character Educational philosophy then involves among other things the application of formal philosophy to the field of education. (p. 4)

This remark clearly establishes the nexus of philosophy and education on matter of human development. Problems in philosophy are problems in education in as much as the problems bear upon knowledge and values.

Metaphysics as a branch of philosophy involves a speculative way of thinking about world realities to imprint on oneself some transcendental principles that constitute their foundations. It could rightly be seen as the philosophy of causality in the sense that the metaphysician thinks to affirm the nature of reality and its primordial cause. With the rise of science through the discovery and application of its own proper method which is the empirical method, metaphysics seems to be outmoded because it does not offer measurable solutions to human problems as well as perceptible proofs of existence of realities. But science dwells on casualty among other variable to determining realities. The speculative way of thinking is presumed to be the foundation of other forms of thinking including the scientific. This is because a person first conceives ideas hypothetically before seeking scientific verification.

The sciences attempt to lay bare the world existents as they are in themselves and the potencies they carry. Several other intervening features are simply presumed. Such features include “Change”, “Source”, “Existence”, “Experience”, “Growth”, “Mortality” among others. They are simply used scientifically to identify the state of affairs of certain realities or to describe the relationship between them. Many of these terms become concepts for metaphysical thinking.

This position paper therefore intends to critically explore the indispensability of metaphysical thinking to scientific and educational thinking. This is prompted by the

tendency to over-embrace the scientific approach to education, which is empirical to the aspersion of its foundational approach, which is rational.

Metaphysics and Scientific Thinking

A statement is accredited to Alfred North Whitehead and it reads: No science can be more secure than the unconscious metaphysics which tacitly it presupposes. (Kneller, 1971, p. 6). This statement simply illumines the mind on the foundational nature of metaphysics in respect of the study of science. In its etymological break up, the word ‘metaphysics’ connotes the study of things beyond what is apprehended by the senses. This presupposes the awareness of such things that the senses offer many. Scientific discoveries presumes the understanding of greater forces or principles as primordial referents.

All sciences, started as branches of philosophy. This, was because the Greek word ‘philosophia’ was understood to embrace all investigations into the nature of man and of the universe (O’ Connor, 1980,p. 19). Scientific investigations focus on particular elements of nature while metaphysics is a reflective study of the abstracts of these investigations. This study disposes the investigator on the extent to generalize the results of the investigation. It also generates new concepts for further thoughts and investigations. For example, through scientific findings one could establish certain truths of mathematics as theories. Proofs are adduced to justify these truths which are made out of empirically verifiable data. One could count material objects to arrive at the concept of figure. Metaphysics provides the first principles for scientific findings hence in the case of the scientific truths of mathematics metaphysics would go further to explore the concept of figure in itself and to establish whether it is an objective and independent reality or not. This is to investigate a possible conception of figure as a mere subjective impression of the mind of an individual. A mathematician would make effective use of figures to establish knowledge if he or she has a good grasp of the concept of figure.

In Aristotle, metaphysics is understood as first philosophy in the sense that he accorded primacy to issues and problems of nature before proceeding to the discussion of natural things themselves. For instance, his discussions of the origin of man, the constitution of the physical universe as well as the nature of the human sensation stem from his views on human knowledge and the relationship of the human mind and body among other things. Beyond speculative thinking, the metaphysician attempts to critically consider the hypotheses that could make scientific investigations intelligible. As Popkin and Strol (1993) remarked, explanations that could derive from the attempt “Purport to encompass the most general and fundamental characteristics of the cosmos, both physical and mental (or spiritual) (p. 100)

The domineering influence of pragmatism in the wake of the nineteenth century and its influence on the study of the sciences introduced a new perception of relationship of metaphysics to science. Pragmatism posits change as the essence of reality thereby rejecting metaphysics as unreal, since nothing exists that is not subjectible to change. But a critical examination of the process of scientific investigations would reveal such speculative features as identifying specific problems, justifying them as research worthy and postulating research questions and hypotheses as the nuclei of the expected research outcome. Each of these steps to scientific research, as one may understand them, rests on metaphysical assumptions of superior ideas as the unchangeable truth, to which the research findings compare. Also, as a matter of fact, change itself is a metaphysical concept that is distinguishable from permanence. These concepts need to be understood to make sense of the pragmatists' theory of change as the essence of reality. Again, to understand reality itself may require a probe into the metaphysical realm.

The onus of metaphysics is cognitive identity otherwise referred to as the first principle. Simply put, a thing needs to be known and clearly identified before one can research further on its usability or relevance. Also the postulation of hypotheses for scientific findings derives from speculative thinking at the first instance, on the issue at hand. Hypotheses are what appeal to the mind to be possible solutions, to identified problems. An explorative mind wanders around the universe in search of knowledge and value. To name a value as authentic presumes the appreciation of a metaphysical value as a first principle to which it compares. Thus the study of science makes inextricable link with metaphysics. Both study the nature of reality but differ only in methodology and focus. The definition of Uduigwomen and Jeje (1999) sums up this point. They said;

Metaphysics is usually defined as the science, which treats the fundamental problems of knowledge and reality transcending experience. Actually to call metaphysics a science makes a cognitive connection with it and besides every science is preoccupied with some fundamentals of nature¹. Metaphysics makes a necessary connection with science since science is all about nature and metaphysics builds on the study of nature. The task of metaphysics is to determine the meaning and the coherence in nature.

Again, this criterion backs up the implication of metaphysics and science. The sciences name realities while metaphysics trace these realities to their possible beginning.

Central topics in the sciences, which includes the nature of space and time, the nature of causation the nature of matter, form, substance among others and the notion of independent existence of these realities inevitably constitute the subject matter for metaphysics. But more than the sciences explore, metaphysics concerns itself with the nature of being man, existence, mind and the world phenomena in general. This is to establish the identities of these realities and once they are established they become disposable to further investigations which may be scientific or non-scientific.

The Need for Metaphysics in Education Discourse

Education issues and problems are generated from life experiences. The process of education itself is structured scientifically to make enquiries about life and postulate possible solutions to problems. But, some questions and problems of education defy scientific answers. This suggests the need to look beyond science for thorough understanding of these problems in a bid to provide solutions to them. For example, an issue that is purely conceptual requires abstract analysis before one can attempt to relate it to the empirical situation. This explores the realm of metaphysics. For instance, there is a limit to which the sciences can teach about life. A person could learn about theories of evolution, the reproductive system and human growth and development among other things but this is usually at the expository level and what he learns may not offer enough knowledge about life.

Beyond the exposition of facts are some hidden truths which are considered integral to other truths that make knowledge. There are hidden truths about life which need to be explored beyond the empirical offerings. A child is born of conjugal union of two members of the opposite sex. The two become the parents and they are recognised as such. But this recognition comes to the child through sharing of experience by the parents who have the primary knowledge of his conception and birth. The child develops to accept this fact through a belief in it. Belief is seen as a disposition of mind. Issues like “belief” “mind” “reality” and even “knowledge” itself among others are ontological matters that may not be sufficiently settled through the empirical offerings of the sciences. They are metaphysical and need to be explored metaphysically, using the appropriate language.

Education like every intellectual activity requires the use of language. As Roy (2005) put it: “Language and reality often present a bland and impenetrable faces to the observer that seems to suggest that only a sliding along it mostly repetitive and impersonal surface is possible” (100). Education, to be worthwhile, is to equip those engaged in the process to break through impersonality of language. This is an experience in which terms and concepts

mean what the user of the language intends them to mean. Language essentially consists in naming a thing or phenomenon to describe, appraise, criticize, or evaluate among other functions. These functions work to the state of mind of those who use the language but are not restricted to individual user. A function that is mind-dependent would embrace speculation. This is the arena of metaphysics. Where language is used to ideate individually but the ideas are shared in communications.

One may ask: Are educational issues metaphysical? The response to this question is ambivalent. In a sense, education as an overtly perceivable and demonstrable activity raises issues and problems that call for overt investigations that may have a bearing with metaphysics. The activities of reading and writing, for instance, are overt to education. Although these activities in themselves may not be metaphysical, yet each of them makes connection with metaphysics in the sense that it has a strong bearing with ideation in the individual. Ideation is a metaphysical experience. It consists in learning to identify and recognise being and in their relationships. This experience applies virtually to all ideas that come within the mind. In this sense therefore one could see educational issues and problems as inherently metaphysical and expressly scientific since they trace ideas and concepts in education to their primordial roots. The contention of Bertrand Russell that there is a “concealed metaphysic” (Kneller, p. 7) in the mind of every philosopher holds true for education since education raises conceptual issues and problems just like philosophy. For educational issues to be philosophical, requires that ideas and concepts are considered in content and context as they make logical connections with educational goals and objectives.

One may briefly examine some educational concepts as they rest on metaphysical foundations. Teaching as a concept in education, for instance, may be considered from both “process” and “product” perspectives. As a process term it may be perceived as an ongoing perennial activity in as much as every experience brings about teaching. Teaching in this way assumes ontological status in the sense that it shares essence with being. Every being perceived in relation to the other possesses the characteristic to teach since by its very perception a being becomes a material for ideation and possible responses. Such offering is teaching. As a product term, teaching denotes dissemination of knowledge. In fact it is often taken to be synonymous with knowledge. This is manifest in such expression as “Your teaching”, “My teaching”, or “The Jewish teaching”. Every teaching activity leaves behind those who undergo the process some knowledge as its end product. Knowledge invariably is a teaching, irrespective of its correspondence or non correspondence with the teacher’s

intention. Again, teaching in this sense carries ontological status since in knowledge, teaching has its being.

Similarly, what is said of teaching applies to learning. This may be due to the fact that teaching and learning are siamesed activities. It is difficult to talk about one without implying the other. Learning too is conceivable as a process and a product term, and it assumes ontological status in the sense that it shares its being with knowledge. Learning and knowledge are concomitant with living. This is because man lives to learn thereby possessing knowledge, and learning itself is an index of living since the dead person cannot learn. Learning is a response to living. Thus, teaching and learning are unified cognitive activities that exhibit the fact of being and existence in a person. In this lies their metaphysical base.

Ozumba (1999) introduced some causal dimensions to perception of education. He said:

Education goals need to appropriate the insight provided by Aristotle's four causes, of formal, material, efficient and final causes. We need to ask what form should education take? What content (material) should education have? Who are to be the qualified operators of the educational system (efficient cause)? What is the goal of education (final cause)? These questions corresponding to Aristotle's four causes, need to be asked and adequately answered if education were not relapse into post modernistic "anything goes" of propaganda rather than reality or shadow instead of substance¹ (p. 48).

The aetiological illumination of speculative thinking about education as shown in this text is particularly worthwhile since the causal dimension to perception of education helps to clearly establish the realities that make the core of the activity. Following Aristotle, metaphysics analyses causes and principle of being and existence. It attempts to know reality as it explores other branches of philosophy namely epistemology and axiology to provide a foundation for them. These two branches of philosophy dwell on core matters in educational thoughts. Metaphysics provides a base for educational thought by establishing knowledge, truths and values, as ontological realities whose nature must be understood to understand its place in educational matters.

The epistemic nature of education dictates the need to examine education issues and problems along with the problem of thinking since it is through thinking that knowledge is acquired. The process of education in itself requires thinking as it is a professional engagement in interactive thinking between the teacher and the learner. Thinking itself assumes several forms depending on its purpose and focus. This paper may not go into all these forms but may suffice to highlight three dimensions that carry implications for metaphysics. The three dimensions which include the speculative analytical and prescriptive underscore the harmonious approach to educational practice. Every thinker on education is believed to begin from speculation on issues and problems concerning the theory and practice of education. A speculation on education remains a mirage unless some understanding is reached on the realities that come within educational discourse. These, for instance, include such things as man, the institution, curriculum, teaching, learning, and several other issues from the disciplines that make educational concepts. These realities must be understood in themselves before a useful attempt could be made to relate them to other things. This entails studying their essence.

Notwithstanding the urge of the technological age to see things work, a system or mechanism may not be effectively put to work unless one understands its componential nature. Through the study of metaphysics, analyses and perceptions are made on the essence of matters and issues. For instance, the age-long epistemological question “What is it to know?” a question that perdures in all disciplines, calls for metaphysical examination since it inquires into the nature of knowledge and the criteria for knowing. Knowledge derives from speculative abstraction of things as they exist and ideation of other existents. This results from the mental activities of taking in sensory impressions and encoding same to form intelligible materials for human behaviour. Education dwells on the acquisition and use of knowledge. A philosopher of education is faced with issues and problems in education that call for identification and critical analysis to arrive at meaningful conclusions.

Kevin Williams (2005) rightly lends a backing to this view in his words:

From the point of view of philosophy of education what is quite fascinating is the salience of issues to do with education and schooling in the literature and philosophically sophisticated treatment of these issues on the part both of professional philosophers and of others(p. 572).

Philosophical issues, one would say, become sophisticated when their metaphysical contents are not clearly spelt out before attempts are made to bring them to bear on human

situations. It behoves the professional philosopher of education therefore to first clearly iron out education issues in their metaphysical context before proceeding to the application of these issues to education systems. For example, let us consider a syndrome that cuts across both education and philosophy, “Education for life”. The two concepts ‘Education’ and ‘Life’ need to be subjected to analysis of their metaphysical content to determine the ration connection between them. There are possible thoughts to build around the concepts. These include centering education in life; making life the objective of education and seeing education and life as concomitants. These are among others.

In as much as one would uphold that educational philosophy depends on general philosophy for useful application to issues and problems, it is expected that formal philosophy is taught as a requisite to the applied philosophy of education. A possible belief that philosophy of education is merely tracing educational issues and problems to their roots in policies and principles would offer a one-sided view of what the enterprise is all about. The complementary side to this is to make education the object of the rational activity. Doing philosophy in education implies engaging in rational thinking on education as well as providing rational base for educational policies and principles.

The activity of philosophizing commences on a speculative note and follows the order of logic. The scientific problem-solving approach to issues and problems would first require clarity of thought on matters to generate useful solutions to problems. A matter is clarifiable when its essence is understood. This calls for implies conceptual analysis on virtually every issue in vogue. A thinker on education needs to develop acuity in this. Every problem by nature has both ontological and cosmological facets. These are the prerogatives of metaphysics to tackle. Metaphysical thinking is an inextricable aspect of philosophy and by extension of philosophy of education.

Conclusion

Although philosophy does not usually provide final solutions to every problem and issue in education, yet it serves to open up several dimensions to thinking on education matters. The learning outcomes of education is much beyond assimilation of facts and figures. As a dynamic activity education requires advancing beyond what is scientifically given to the mind. Concepts such as “Matter”, “Mind”, “Body”, “Soul”, “Reality” among others remain metaphysical issues in education that need to be re-visited for new perspectives to educational thought. Metaphysics prepares the philosopher of education to examine philosophic questions to the extent to which they bear on education issues. One would

therefore recommend the need for the study of metaphysics as a primary step to understanding issues and concepts in education.

References:

- Kneller G. (1971) *Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, New York, Wiley and Sons Inc. p. 4
- O'Connor D.J. (1980) *An Introduction to Philosophy of Education*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul. P. 19
- Ozumba G. (1999) Branches of Philosophy and Education. Uduigwonen A.F. and Ogbinaka K. (eds) *Philosophy and Education*, Lagos, Obaroh Ogbinaka Pub. P. 48.
- Popkin R. H. and Stroll A. (1993) *Philosophy made simple*, New York, Broadway Books, p. 100.
- Roy K. (2005) On Sense and Nonsense: Looking Beyond the Literacy Wars, *The Journal of the Philosophy of Education of Great Britain*, 39 (1) 100.
- Uduigwonen A.F. and Jeje K.O. (1999) Metaphysics and Education, in Uduigwonen and Ogbinaka (eds) *Philosophy and Education*, Lagos, Obaroh and Ogbinaka Pub. P. 79.
- Williams K. (2005) Booknotes, *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 39, (3), 572.