

Introduction

Philosophy of education begins with three basic questions—What is man? What should man become? And How should we help man to become what man should be? Too often assumptions are made about the first two questions without articulating or justifying the answers to them. The “how to” questions make sense only after the first two have some kind of answers. One might ask, “what is the best way?” But no answer makes sense without first answering “to where?” Modern educational theories and practices tend to fit somewhere on a continuum between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation.

For me, a contrast can be drawn between two very different educational metaphors. One view tends to view man as a ball of clay that must be shaped and molded according to the sculptor’s desires or the factory’s specifications.



This assumes the pliability of the learner and the complete control of the system that sets the specifications. It makes little sense to ask the ball of clay what it wants to become and to ask what motivates a ball of clay seems ludicrous, but many educational theories have made such assumptions in practice. Students are viewed, from this perspective as products and the teachers or system carries the full responsibility for producing the desired results.

A contrasting metaphor views man as a seed. Seeds are bundles of potential that must be placed in a proper environment to develop properly.



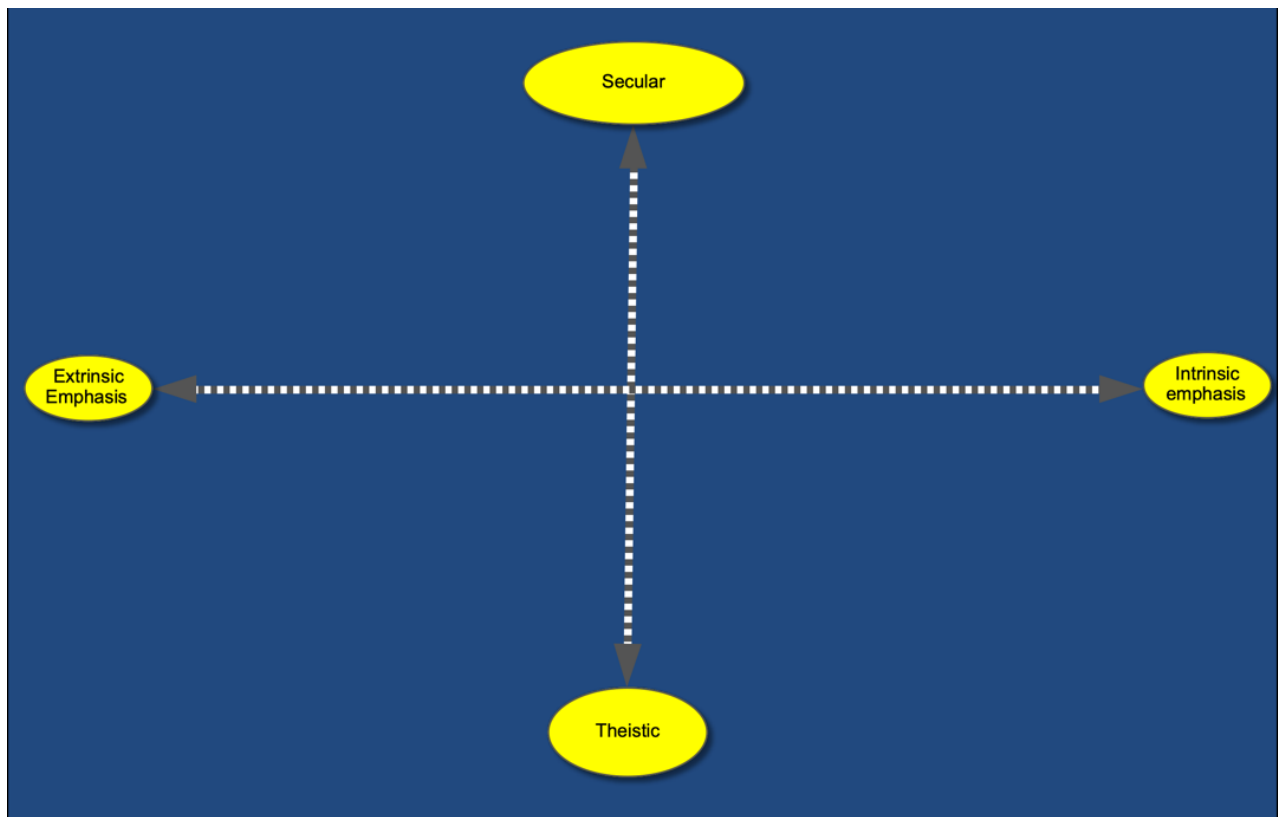
An acorn has the potential to become an oak tree. Each tree develops in a unique way. If society, for some reason, wanted tumbleweeds instead of oak trees, an acorn could never become a very good tumble weed, though perhaps a bonsai master could make one look somewhat similar. Acorns, however, have their own nature and should be cultivated appropriately for that nature. Again, it sounds strange to ask what motivates a seed, but placed in the proper environment surrounded by the proper nutrients an acorn can flourish. Its growth, while unique in some aspects, follows predictable stages but forcing it to conform to average growth expectations would only harm its full development. As an educational metaphor this line of thinking would put far less emphasis on the teacher or the system and far more on the creation of a powerful, engaging environment for learning and the autonomy of the student. Once the environment is established the educator plays the role of a facilitator.

Educational theories, then, tend to fall between two extreme emphases:



To the far left are those positions that seek to shape the balls of clay into predetermined specifications as products and to the far right are those who give free reign to the interests and drives of the students to determine their learning.

Another continuum provides another contrast that historically has influenced educational theories. At one end would be those theories that attempt to explain all relevant educational elements as if God and religion were irrelevant, i.e. secular. This position would not be considered atheistic because for them religion has no practical place in educational thought. In this sense the atheist is too interested in religion (even if he or she would like to banish it altogether—it is a religious position.) Secular theories do not take any stand regarding religion—they merely move on without it. At the other end of the continuum is the Theistic. In these theories the notion of a God is inherently embedded within them. There may be a wide range of beliefs regarding God, but these educational theories are incomplete without a concept of God.



We now face four quadrants within which educational theories can be considered. Each places a different emphasis. Theories can emphasize more or less within any of these models.

Societal Model

The top left might be called the societal model. Theories in this quadrant tend to be secular and extrinsic. They tend to view man as a ball of clay that should be shaped into some type of social role player. Those theories that want to replicate the existing society, might be called conservative. They see their task as one preparing individuals to take their place in the existing society. They recognize that an entire culture could be annihilated in a single generation if individuals are not trained to reproduce it. Theorists that might fit here would include: J. Locke, E. Durkheim, C.H. Judd, J.F. Herbart, A. Adler and A. N. Whitehead. Others emphasize the changing nature of societies. Who really knows what a child born today will need to know even by the time they graduate from high school (if high schools even continue to exist in the next 18 years or so)? These theories seek to prepare students to have the general skills to meet the demands of a changing society. These theorists might be called progressive. They might include authors like: J. Dewey, H. Rugg and G. Counts. Still others believe the current society and culture demand more radical change. They seek to prepare individuals dissatisfied with the current system with a vision of some ideal. These may be called utopian. Theories in this category might include: K. Marx, S. Bowles & H. Gintis, P. Freire, H. Giroux and M. Apple. Finally, another group of theories are not particularly political in their views and seek merely the ways in which a technology of human behavior can be created to produce the results any societal model desires. These may be called behaviorist and may include authors like J. Watson, E. Thorndike and B.F. Skinner.

If man is viewed as a ball of clay, the teacher or the system becomes the sculptor or the factory to produce a useful product or social role player according to the desired specifications. The relationship of teacher to student, from this perspective, may be typified as the king to the subject. It is hierarchical and secular. A student may love their kings or hate them, but the relationship requires their obedience and conformity. "Good students" learn even to anticipate and adapt to the demands of their teachers in order to gain the social rewards for their conformity. To illustrate how

engrained this model tends to be, I sometimes ask my students during class to address me as “Your royal highness” when asking questions. It’s a little embarrassing for both of us to recognize how well it exaggerates this relationship

Individualist Model

Secular theories that fall in the top right quadrant view man as a seed—a bundle of potential that develops and grows within a particular environment. Again, they may be more or less extreme in their views, but tend to focus more on the learner than on the social outcomes. Those who call for a return to nature may be called romantics. These authors celebrate individual freedom to learn according to their basic natures and desires with as little direct intervention as possible by adults or systems. Seeds don’t choose what they become, but theories within this model tend to emphasize individual choice in the learning process. Authors with this type of orientation may include: J.J. Rousseau, A. S. Neil and M. Montessori. Other authors within this model focuses on the stages of development that people go through. They would include: J. Piaget, L. Kohlberg, and E. Erikson. Humanist psychologists (such as: A. Maslow, K. Rogers and M. Buber) have often addressed education as well. They tend to believe that choice is an essential part of a good education. It would also be appropriate to identify existentialists who address education such as F. Nietzsche, J. Sartre and M. Greene. Who raise the questions of existence and morality without relying upon a religious foundation for them.

Individualist theories place the teacher in the role of the gardener who does not make seeds germinate, but nourishes their own natural growth. Individual growth is the goal of these educators. As a gardener, the teacher creates a rich learning environment that encourages, fosters, and provokes natural development and choice.

Theological Model

Historically, the most prevalent educational theories have viewed man more as a ball of clay that needed to be shaped and molded to become “good” members of a particular church or religious belief system. Often the student, from this perspective, is seen as a ball of clay assumed to be evil, corrupt or fallen. The drives and interests of the students must be controlled and elevated; they certainly should not be trusted. The spirit of man is seen as in a constant struggle against physical drives that must be conquered for spiritual development. If the body is not seen as evil, it is most often viewed at least as a distraction to the spiritually higher. A Catholic educational version might turn to a St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, De LaSalle or J. Maritain, while a Protestant version might build on the ideas of J. Calvin, M. Luther, H.H. Horne or others. Non-Christian educational theories might look to Buddha, Averroes, Avicenna and others.

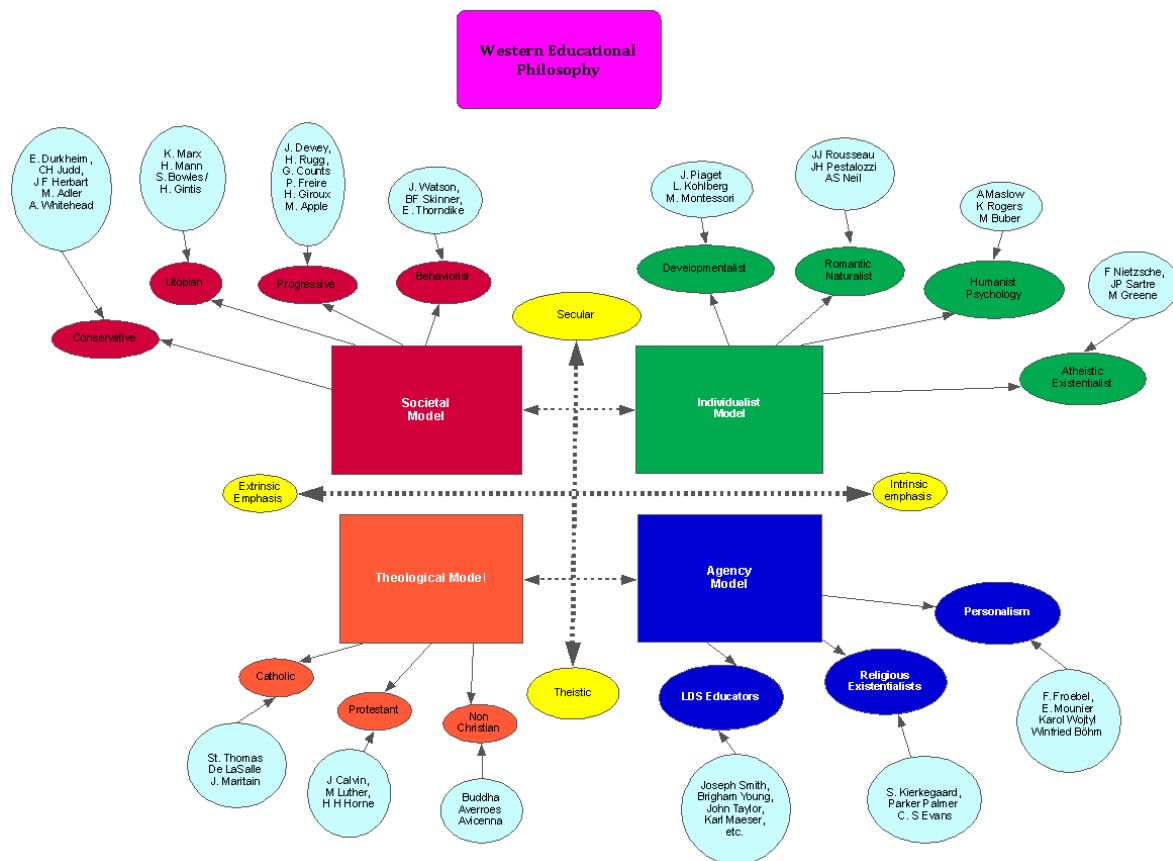
The relationship between teacher and student according to this model differs from the societal model by adding religious authority much more like the priest to the parishioner. Again it is hierarchical, but it presumes that the teacher has been given divine authority to prescribe what the student should learn. The curriculum is designed to prepare the students to become faithful members of the given faith.

Agency Model

An agentic theory of education presumes that man is much more like a seed than a ball of clay, but with eternal potential that can be realized through one’s choices. Many from this position believe that man is a child of God with a divine potential of their own. Choice is fundamental to this position, but it is also inherently religious, so choice is always in a context of eternal responsibility. While membership in a particular religion, might be important, conformity to a given Church is not as fundamental as seeking to discover one’s eternal mission and choosing to fulfill it. There may be common skills that are helpful, maybe even critical, but they must be chosen and no human authority should assume another’s agency.

The relationship between teacher and student is much more that of a sibling. Siblings are not necessarily equal in ability, insight or resources, but they have a basic responsibility to support and encourage one another. Teachers from this position have a responsibility to support their students, but also to respect their students’ capacities to make their

own learning choices. They may be a little further along in their mortal experience, but are engaged in their own quest to discover and fulfill their foreordained purpose or missions. At the same time, students share a responsibility to strengthen their teachers.



So in a crude way we can begin to contrast educational theories based upon a few fundamental assumptions they make.

This book contains abridged versions of three fundamental educational texts: Plato's Republic, John Locke's Some Thoughts on Education, and Jean Jacques Rousseau's Emile. They were selected because they provide a rich introduction to the basic arguments that educators still face.

Plato places education in context of creating an ideal society, led by a "philosopher king." In this book he introduces a Socratic method of inquiry. The reader, in fact, is invited into a dialogue to consider an ideal state and the process for preparing the leaders in it. For him the process of engaging the question is more important than reaching someone's predetermined answer. He viewed learning as a type of recollection of what the immortal soul already knows, but not all natures have the capacity to retain what they know. True philosophers (lovers of wisdom) can be identified only after years of rigorous testing and refinement. Those who lack the potential to become philosophers should be prepared for lesser social roles. Trapped in a distracting physical body, the mind has to be challenged to reach for a realm unhindered by the physical—a realm of pure forms. Perfect justice, truth and beauty are qualities never found in the mortal realm of the senses that can only present examples or shadows reminiscent of the perfect forms. The forms can only be apprehended in a purified mind. No philosopher would seek to lead when they could rather spend their time and energy contemplating the eternal unchanging, but no one would be better qualified to direct a society than the philosopher.

In the Republic, Plato raises powerful questions that deserve to be reconsidered even today such as:

Who has the prime responsibility for education? --The state, the family, the teacher? Who should decide what should be taught? Who should be allowed to teach it? When should things be learned?

What is the purpose of the curriculum? How much structure should it contain? Can truth be received by reading or listening to someone's "dead words" or must we become engaged in a dialectic? Can a true curriculum be prepared in advance or must it emerge based on the questions of the learner?

Can all be educated or should we concentrate only on the few? Should education be channeled toward specialists only? Is it possible to be a "late bloomer" with regard to philosophical capacity?

Should schools be the instrument to stratify society?

Can we elevate the mind without building upon the concrete?

Can education ever be forced at any level without perverting it?

What role should the physical body have in true learning?

Who is the qualified teacher and what should bring them to teaching? What is the counterfeit of real teaching? Can teachers teach for money without becoming corrupt? Can money ever be an appropriate consideration for the teacher?

What is the source of virtue? Does it come through contemplation?

John Locke made great contributions to modern thought. He gave us a rationale for our first Amendment in his "Letter on Toleration" and was cited by our founding fathers more frequently than any other thinker. He introduced the concept that man begins as a "tabula rasa"—a blank slate upon which experience writes. This concept was revolutionary, partly because of the implications proposed regarding the divine right of kings. If we all begin as blank slates, how do we justify a king based upon birth?—it must be justified at least in part by his education. Similar to the ball of clay metaphor, this view invites the educator to take control of his (he does not address the education of a young woman) student by convincing him to love praise and despise shame. This, for him, was the great secret of education. Through it, a young man could be raised to become a cultured gentleman. He lays out a curriculum with strategy, sequence and content. Though written in 1697, the text is astonishingly modern. You might think it was written last week if it used more modern words and said less about such topics as Latin.

Finally, Jean Jacques Rousseau proposes a "natural" way to raise an imaginary boy. He found Locke's desire to produce a cultured gentleman to be a repulsive corruption of nature. Writing in pre-revolutionary France, he found the "cultured gentlemen" of his day to be anything but exemplary. He was preoccupied with Plato's Republic and published his reply in two books published the same year. Emile describes the way to raise a young man according to nature and the Social Contract proposes an ideal society. Rousseau never pretended to be a systematic philosopher and was a severe critic of society. A man of many contradictions, he wrote a remarkably insightful novel about education even though he placed his own 5 illegitimate children (his Protestant marriage wasn't recognized in France) in a foundling home. Rousseau shifted the view of education from the extrinsic shaping of the student to the arrangement of the environment to foster the development of the child. He viewed the child much more like a seed that needed to be planted in a rich environment and allowed to grow in its own way, rather than a ball of clay to be shaped and molded to meet some social specifications.





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