

A Reply to James Muir

JOHN WILSON
Oxford University

I am strongly in sympathy with the general tone of what Dr. Muir says; less so with his arguments and (if I understand them) his conclusions. He is at his most convincing when criticizing the Isocratics, though even here he does not quite bring out the basic point. The point is, I take it, that because human beings are liable to error every society needs critics as well as functionaries: so that there must be some people, somewhere, who for some of the time inspect political (and not only political) doctrines in the light of reason, rather than just taking them for granted. And these people, *ex hypothesi*, need a kind of education which is not politically based; something at least more like Muir's Socratic education.

However, that does not take us anything like as far as Muir wants us to go. One obvious consideration is that perhaps (as Plato believed) not many people are capable of being educated in this way (only potential philosopher-kings need apply), so that Socratic education cannot stand as an overall educational theory. More obviously still, human beings cannot *only* be concerned with what Muir calls 'fundamental' or 'universal' human questions: they are under pressure from all sorts of contingent facts, and need at least to learn how to survive and flourish well enough to tackle such questions. They require the arts or sciences of medicine, economics, self-defence and so on, if only as preconditions for doing philosophy; and the learning needed for these will on any plausible account form a substantial part of their education.

The real problem is how to adjudicate the values inherent in Socratic education with other values, not all of which are irrational or even political. In doing this we have not only to weigh what might be called 'utilitarian' or 'extrinsic' goods (health, material prosperity, etc.) against Socratic values; we have also to weigh Socratic values against other forms of life which are also valued for their own sake. I imagine Muir would not deny that such things as the appreciation of

music, literature and the arts, or the pursuit of various forms of thought (mathematics, science, history and so forth), have value in this way; so that the question arises of how much time we should spend on these and other such things rather than on philosophy.

What has happened, I suspect, is that Muir thinks the philosophy, the 'fundamental questions,' to be so important that he is prepared to identify it with the concept of education. His final words, "the question of *educational value*" (his italics), suggest that he thinks that there must be some unique value in education itself: and if not political, then necessarily Socratic. But 'education' marks a much more elastic concept (see Wilson 1979); it does indeed go beyond training, indoctrination and socialization; and it has some connection with autonomy and critical thinking via the concepts of learning, truth, and knowledge. But it leaves largely open the question of *what* is to be learned; and the 'value' of education inheres in the contents of learning. That does not make education a contestable concept: what is contested is the comparative importance of this or that contents. Muir attempts to monopolize the concept, in defiance of normal usage: that hardly addresses the question of what kinds of learning are really important. *Prima facie* at least there will be many *different* kinds: it is fairly easy to show that blind subservience to a political doctrine, or indeed any attempt to answer the question in political terms, is a non-starter. But there are other important things in human life, not only besides politics but besides philosophy.

There is indeed a kind of transcendental argument for Socratic education or philosophy: that philosophy is necessary in order to deal with the question just mentioned (though other disciplines, perhaps most obviously psychology, are also needed). Perhaps what Muir really want to say is that to adjudicate what is important for human life, which will include adjudicating the contents of learning and education, philosophy is the most relevant discipline. With that I wholeheartedly agree, because the questions involved just are (in large part) philosophical questions; so that if we reflect honestly on education we shall inevitable be driven to philosophy. In that sense philosophy is basic or central not only to education but to all other human enterprises (including politics). That is a point of logic or methodology, not of ideology; philosophy stands above or beyond any particular ideology or theory or *Weltanschauung*, its task is to assess these in the light of pure reason. Certainly that lesson has to be

constantly repeated, particularly at a time when education is dominated by politics and so-called 'philosophy' by some kind of relativism. But it is, I submit, a lesson which is not best taught by identifying philosophy with education general.

REFERENCE

Wilson, J. (1979). *Preface to the philosophy of education*. London: RKP.

John Wilson has previously served as Second Master at King's School, Canterbury, Professor of Religion at Trinity College, Toronto, Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Sussex, and Director of the Farmington Trust, Oxford. He presently holds the position of Senior Research Associate at the Oxford University Department of Educational Studies.

